

Short note | Nota breve

An aberrantly coloured buzzard *Buteo bannermani* on Santo Antão, Cape Verde Islands, in November 2012, with notes on the past and present status of the species

Magnus Robb & René Pop

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On 30 November 2012, we observed a white presumed Cape Verde buzzard *Buteo bannermani* Swann, 1919 in the northern mountains of Santo Antão, Cape Verde Islands. The bird was defending a territory on the west side of the road between Corda and Vila da Ribeira Grande. Judging from the amount of time it spent in aerial display, it probably concerned a male. RP managed to make a series of photos, including some of the bird perched at a distance of *ca.* 60 m (Fig. 1 & 2). In these it was possible to confirm that the eyes were dark and neither pale nor reddish, identifying the bird as an adult and excluding the possibility of an albino. Its apparent mate was a bird of normal appearance.

The plumage of the aberrant buzzard appeared essentially all-white. From below, however, the first primary on each wing appeared to be a very pale brown or creamy and may have been moulted recently, while the whiter appearance of the other flight feathers may have been due to bleaching. The pinkish colour of the bill of the white buzzard observed in Santo Antão would indicate either leucism (a partial or total lack of both melanins in feathers) or ino, while the very pale brown of the first



Fig. 1. Cape Verde buzzard *Buteo bannermani*, Santo Antão, 30 November 2012 (René Pop).

primary would appear to narrow this down to *ino*, a colour aberration caused by the qualitative reduction of both melanins due to incomplete synthesis (oxidation) of both eumelanin and pheomelanin (Grouw 2010, 2013). However, *ino* is almost exclusively restricted to females, while – in view of its display behaviour – our bird was most likely a male. Therefore, it probably concerns a strong example of dilution, a quantitative reduction in colouration that can be caused by a range of different mutations (H. van Grouw *in litt.*). It should be noted that correct identification of colour aberrations in birds in the field is often problematic and not always possible (Grouw 2013). As far as we know, this is the first documented example of a white Cape Verde buzzard.



Fig. 2. Cape Verde buzzard *Buteo bannermani*, Santo Antão, 30 November 2012 (René Pop).

In the common buzzard *B. buteo* (L., 1758), white birds (leucistic or otherwise, not to be confused with sometimes very pale individuals from northern European populations) are occasionally reported. A quick

search on the internet produced the following recent examples:

- A bird in flight, similar in general appearance to the Cape Verde buzzard reported here, was photographed in Austria in March 2008 (<http://tinyurl.com/c57bsaz>; accessed 16 February 2013);
- A wholly white common buzzard (probably a ‘brown’ mutant (a change of appearance of the eumelanin granules; see Grouw 2006, 2010), showing sparse brown upperwing-coverts, was photographed in Fife, Scotland in September 2010 (<http://tinyurl.com/c378tr5>; accessed 16 February 2013);
- Possibly the same bird was photographed at Loch Ken, west of Dumfries, Scotland, in June 2012 (<http://tinyurl.com/83ydvh5>; accessed 16 February 2013);
- A wholly white common buzzard, showing just a few brown feathers on the nape (probably a form of dilution), was photographed near Roskilde, Denmark, 6 January 2013 (<http://tinyurl.com/bc5vwu2>; accessed 6 February 2013).

In addition, largely white common buzzards showing ‘brown’ mutation were reported from western Poland in August 2005 and southern Poland in August 2011 (Ciach *et al.* 2011). Another common buzzard, also showing ‘brown’ mutation, was photographed in Drenthe, the Netherlands, in November 2012 (Bottema & Bottema-MacGillavry 2013).

The Cape Verde buzzard is probably the rarest *Buteo* in the world and the total population may not exceed a few 10s of pairs, with the largest numbers occurring on the islands of Santiago and Santo Antão (Hazevoet 1995). It was listed as critically endangered in the First Red List of Cape Verde (Hazevoet 1996). During our six day stay on Santo Antão in late November and early December 2012, we observed a total of between five and seven Cape Verde buzzards in the northern part of the island, although we did not carry out a systematic survey. A week’s survey on Santo Antão in June 1999 only yielded four buzzard sightings (Palacios 2002). In the early 1990s, the population on Santiago was estimated at *ca.*

10 pairs (Hazevoet 1995) and has since remained within that size range (C.J. Hazevoet *in litt.*). Until the late 1960s, a small breeding population probably also existed on São Nicolau (Naurois 1973), but there is only one recent record of a single bird in March 1996 (Hazevoet 1997). There are also records from Fogo (3), Brava (1), São Vicente (1) and Boavista (3), but so far no indication of breeding there (Hazevoet 1995, 2003). The single record from São Vicente is of some interest as it concerns the type specimen of *bannermani* in The Natural History Museum (BMNH), Tring, UK, said to have been collected 'near Mindelo Bay', 26 September 1913 (Hazevoet 1995). Being the only record for the island, one may wonder if it had perhaps been brought from nearby Santo Antão and purchased at the port town of Mindelo on São Vicente. The three records (two old, one recent) from Boavista may in fact not refer to *bannermani*. James (1984) provisionally identified a second year male in BMNH,

collected on Boavista in May 1897, as *B. cirtensis* (Levaillant, 1850). Moreover, a recently fledged female (indicating local breeding) in the Cleveland Museum of Natural History, Ohio, USA, collected on Boavista in March 1924 and received on loan at the Yale Peabody Museum, New Haven, Connecticut, USA, where it was examined in December 1991, also showed characters of *cirtensis*, although this was hard to certify due to the specimen being of a juvenile and the dearth of comparative material at hand at the time (C.J. Hazevoet *in litt.*). The sighting of a single buzzard on Boavista, 25 March 2001, may perhaps be referable to a vagrant *cirtensis* rather than *bannermani* (Hazevoet 2003). Indeed, the desert-like environment on Boavista is quite similar to the habitat of *cirtensis* on the African mainland, while on Santo Antão and Santiago (and formerly on São Nicolau), *bannermani* almost exclusively haunts the mountainous interior regions of these islands.

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Magnus Robb, Rua Dr Pedro Almeida Lima 6, 2710-122 Sintra, Portugal; magnus.robb@me.com

René Pop, Kikkertstraat 17, 1795 AA De Cocksdorp, The Netherlands; pop.texel@texel.com

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