

A PLUMAGE ABERRATION OF *CARIAMA CRISTATA*

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**A plumage aberration of *Cariama cristata*.**—In the collections of the National Museum of Natural History is a skin of *Cariama cristata* so strikingly different from the normal appearance of the species that at first it would seem to be a totally different form. The specimen (USNM 222521) has regrettably little data, having been a captive in the National Zoological Park (Washington, D. C.). It is labelled "‘Paraguay’—Rec’d from J. N. Ruffin—Died Feb. 25, 1911." The carcass was preserved in alcohol and shows the bird to be a female with a fairly well-developed ovary (follicles ca. 2–3 mm). The specimen had previously been misidentified as *Chunga burmeisteri* but this was later crossed out on the label and *Cariama* substituted. In size and in all the external features save color, the specimen agrees with *Cariama cristata* and it is clearly referable to that species and not to *Chunga burmeisteri*.

The aberrant bird differs in having the finely vermiculated grayish-ochraceous areas of the normal plumage largely replaced by dark clove brown (Figure 1). The crest is very dark blackish-brown with only occasional traces of lighter vermiculations. The entire dorsum is dark brown. The wing coverts are dark brown with lighter vermiculations; a few of the coverts are considerably lighter than

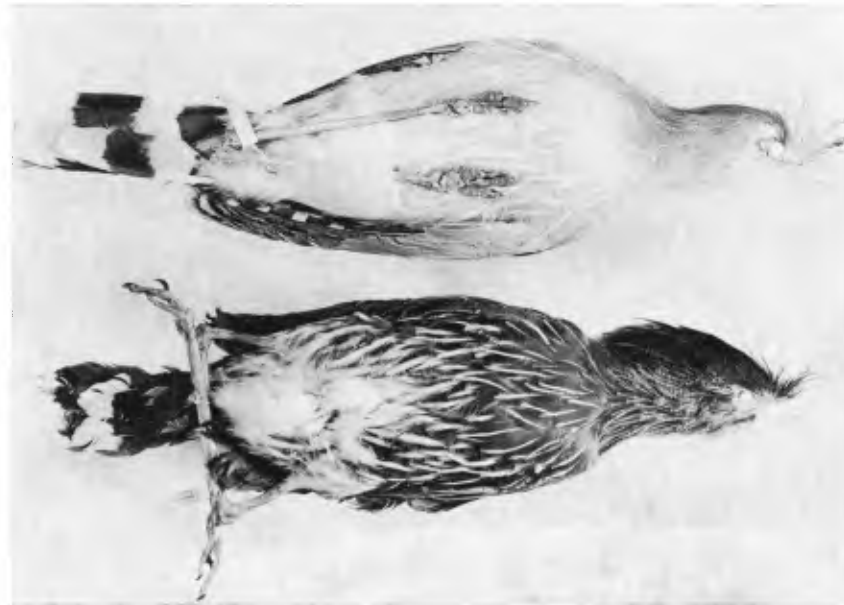


Figure 1. Normal plumage of *Cariama cristata*, USNM 335304 (above) and aberrant melanistic specimen, USNM 222521 (below), photographed by Victor E. Krantz.

the others and approach the normal coloration. The remiges and rectrices are barred with white as in the normal plumage but the white bars of the tail (which is in heavy molt) are more heavily infused with brown flecks. The ends of the neck hackles are a light straw color and stand out against the dark basal portions. The margins of the feathers of the breast and flanks are clove brown, greatly accentuating the white or buffy shaft streaks and very different from the normal plumage in which this pattern is obscured by the paler feather margins. The lower belly and under tail coverts are buffy white as in normal birds but scattered patches of the basal down are brown rather than the usual white.

I find no mention of any such plumage of *Cariama* in the literature. It represents neither a juvenal nor an immature plumage, as these are illustrated by Heinroth (1924, *J. Ornithol.* 72: 119) and Miranda-Ribeiro (1937, *Rev. Mus. Paulista* 23: 36) and are similar to the adult. Miranda-Ribeiro also described presumed geographical variation in this species but this variation does not encompass anything similar to the specimen described here. None of the other specimens at the USNM (some of which are also zoo birds), or those at the American Museum of Natural History or the Yale Peabody Museum (a total of only about 15 skins) shows any tendency towards such dark coloration. It can only be assumed, therefore, that the dark bird represents a peculiar sort of melanistic aberration. It is possible that this melanistic condition was induced by some factor of its captivity, especially as high humidity can at times cause increased melanin deposition in captive birds.

The distinct streaks of the aberrant bird serve to point out that in normal birds the general light tone of the plumage renders the pattern nearly obsolete. This suggests that the ancestors of *Cariama* may have been darker in order for the pattern to be at all evident, and that the pale plumage of *cristata* may have evolved as an adaptation to the arid grassland it now occupies. It should be noted that the other species in the family, *Chunga burmeisteri*, is a forest bird that roosts high in trees (Sclater and Hudson 1889, Argentine Ornithology, vol. 2, London, R. H. Porter). Both species nest in low bushes.—STORRS L. OLSON, Department of Vertebrate Zoology, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D. C. 20560. Accepted 3 Jan. 73.