An Egyptian Vulture *Neophron percnopterus* with largely pale bill in Djibouti

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Pale (ivory-yellowish) bill is characteristic of the adult birds of the Indian subspecies of the Egyptian Vulture, *Neophron percnopterus ginginianus*, while the rest of this species features dark (grey to black) bills. Recent sightings of two pale-billed birds far from the range of *ginginianus*, on Socotra (Porter & Suleiman 2012) and in Ethiopia (Angelov *et al.* 2013) respectively, have raised the question on the origin of their unusual coloration. Porter & Suleiman (2012) proposed an abnormal pigmentation for their bird because of unusual colours on its claws, some of which were pale ("white") and others had a black base. However, adult *ginginianus* would also have paler claws than nominate *percnopterus* according to Ali & Ripley (1968), although Naoroji (2006) does not mention this difference in its list of subspecific characters. Angelov *et al.* (2013) entitled their paper as a possible sighting of the Indian subspecies, an opinion supported by Mundy (2014). Judging from the published photograph of their bird, hereafter referred to as the Ethiopian bird, the claws were dark and the bill mainly pale, but with dark nuances at the tip and near the nostrils.

During a seven-day tour of Djibouti I took close-range photographs of five adult Egyptian Vultures. Four of them showed the usual dark bill and claws, but the bird photographed in the town of Tadjoura (opposite side of the Golfe to Djibouti city) on 31 December 2017 had the whole horny sheath of the upper mandible pale, whereas the distal part of the lower mandible was distinctly dark. The Djiboutian bird had paler claws than the Ethiopian bird (Figure 1). It seemed a solitary and approachable bird, but, being close to a military school, I was allowed a short observation only. Later examination of the photographs of the Djiboutian and Ethiopian birds evidenced, in both cases, a further character of *ginginianus* compared to nominate *percnopterus*, which is mentioned in Naoroji's (2006) list of differences: a greater amount of white on the secondaries.

Egyptian Vultures are common in Djibouti, so that, having found an unusual individual in the very small sample I saw may mean that such seemingly odd birds are not rare in that country. Djibouti is the first African country reached by the large numbers of Egyptian Vultures that immigrate from Asia through the Bab-al-Mandab Strait (e.g. McGrady *et al.* 2014). Finding a larger proportion of pale-billed birds in Djibouti than elsewhere in Africa would support the existence of an influence from *ginginianus*. Although the Indian subspecies is currently not seen as migratory as nominate *percnopterus*, both Angelov *et al.* (2013) and Mundy (2014) proposed that *ginginianus* individuals might make long-distance movements. In my opinion this is not a necessary condition to have *ginginianus*-like birds far from the range of the subspecies

proper. The possibility of inter-breeding, only a hint in Mundy (2014), may be worthy of more consideration. In north-western India, where *ginginianus* and nominate *percnopterus* occur together (Naoroji 2006), Whistler (1922) secured a breeding male in which the bill was "dead horny-white, with a wedge-shaped blackish mark near the tip of the cutting-edge of the upper mandible". Considering that juveniles have blackish bill tips in both subspecies (Naoroji 2006), a smudge of dark colour might remain at the bill tip in some adults of *ginginianus*, a possibility in the Ethiopian bird. In the Djiboutian bird, however, the dark was completely absent from the upper mandible and extensive, instead, on the lower mandible. This contrasting marking suggests to me a hybrid trait. As a working hypothesis I propose that hybridization in the contact zone could produce birds with (some of) the morphological traits of *ginginianus* and the migratory tendency of nominate *percnopterus*, and the gene flow could then reach Africa, making hybrid traits appear in African populations.

Figure 1: The largely pale-billed Egyptian Vulture in the town of Tadjoura (author).

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