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## Leucistic Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*) sighted in Ciénaga de Zapata National Park, Cuba

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*Photo: Ernesto Reyes Mouriño*

## Leucistic Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*) sighted in Ciénaga de Zapata National Park, Cuba

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**Abstract** A leucistic Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*) was observed in Ciénaga de Zapata National Park, Cuba, in January 2018. The individual was in a flock of Willets and Short-billed Dowitchers (*Limnodromus griseus*). The other Willets had normal plumage, and all Willets in the flock—including the leucistic bird—were identified to the subspecies level as Western Willets (*T. s. inornata*).

**Keywords** Ciénaga de Zapata National Park, Cuba, leucism, *Tringa semipalmata*, Willet

**Resumen** Individuo leucístico de *Tringa semipalmata* avistado en el Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata, Cuba—Un individuo leucístico de *Tringa semipalmata* fue observado en el Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata, Cuba, en enero de 2018. El mismo estaba en un bando de *Tringa semipalmata* y *Limnodromus griseus*. Los otros individuos de *T. semipalmata* tenían un plumaje normal, y todos los individuos de esta especie en el bando, incluyendo el leucístico, fueron identificados al nivel de la subespecie como *T. s. inornata*.

**Palabras clave** Cuba, leucismo, Parque Nacional Ciénaga de Zapata, *Tringa semipalmata*, Zarapico Real

**Résumé** Observation d'un Chevalier semipalmé (*Tringa semipalmata*) leucisitique dans le parc national de Ciénaga de Zapata, à Cuba—Un Chevalier semipalmé (*Tringa semipalmata*) leucisitique a été observé dans le parc national de Ciénaga de Zapata, à Cuba. Il se trouvait dans un groupe de Chevaliers semipalmés et de Bécassins roux (*Limnodromus griseus*). Les autres Chevaliers semipalmés avaient un plumage normal et tous les individus du groupe, y compris l'oiseau leucistique, ont été identifiés comme appartenant à la sous-espèce *T. s. inornata*.

**Mots clés** Chevalier semipalmé, Cuba, leucisme, Parc national de Ciénaga de Zapata, *Tringa semipalmata*

Shortly before noon on 28 January 2018, at Las Salinas, Ciénaga de Zapata National Park, Cuba (22°06'39.2"N, 81°16'52.5"W), members of a BirdsCaribbean Cuba Bird Tour participating in a Caribbean Waterbird Census spotted and for 20 min observed a unique Willet (*Tringa semipalmata*). The individual was swimming or wading belly deep in a shallow pool of mangrove-fringed salt water along with about 70 other Willets and 35 Short-billed Dowitchers (*Limnodromus griseus*) (Fig. 1a). The Willet was almost entirely white, with smudges of gray on its wings, crown, and lores. It had a normal bill color, with the distal half black and the proximal half light blue, and its eyes were dark (Fig. 1b, 1c). In flight, the individual appeared to lack the distinctive wing pattern that typifies the species, and was shown to have normal leg color (Fig. 1d). The individual stayed mostly within a group of other Willets and appeared to be slightly smaller than its adjacent conspecifics (Fig. 1b, 1c).

These observations indicate that the individual was leucistic. The possibility of albinism was ruled out because that condition is characterized by the absence of all pigmentation, resulting in birds with entirely white plumage, pink eyes, and light-colored bills, legs, and feet (Buckley 1982). Leucism is a condition caused by a genetic mutation that leads to a partial loss of pigmentation; in birds, this results in white, pale, or patchy coloration of the feathers (Buckley 1982). The Willet in question had abnormally colored plumage but a normally colored bill and a dark eye, and therefore was determined to be leucistic.

Feather abnormalities are widespread, but rare, in birds. For example, Gross (1965) listed more than 50 families of birds in which some form of white pigment aberration had been observed. Leucism is apparently uncommon in shorebirds (Gross 1965, Graham *et al.* 2005), but there have been a few records of leucistic Willets in various places, including California (Collins 2003), Massachusetts (Nikula 2004), Virginia (Lamoreaux 2013), and northwestern Mexico (Ayala-Perez *et al.* 2013).

By consulting with experts (J. Gerbracht and T. Eubanks pers. comm.) and comparing to photographs and descriptions of Willets in field guides (e.g., O'Brien *et al.* 2006a, 2006b) and pub-

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**Fig. 1.** Leucistic Willet observed in Ciénaga de Zapata National Park, Cuba, on 28 January 2018. (a) Leucistic Willet wading and swimming with other Willets and Short-billed Dowitchers. (b) A closer look at the gray smudges on the leucistic Willet's wings, crown, and lores. (c) Note the long, fine-tipped bill and non-sloping forehead of all four birds, suggesting that these are Western Willets. The smaller size of the leucistic Willet is evident in this photograph. (d) The leucistic Willet lacks the distinctive underwing pattern typical of Willets, shows a hint of dusky gray on the wing tips above, and has normal leg color. All photographs by Ernesto Reyes Mouríño.

lished papers (O'Brien 2006, Oswald et al. 2016), the Willets in this particular flock in Ciénaga de Zapata National Park were identified to subspecies as Western Willets (*T. s. inornata*). All of the Willets had long, finely-pointed bills and non-sloping foreheads, both key identification marks for this subspecies (Fig. 1). Western Willets are also more elongated, with longer necks and legs, and curved backs (O'Brien 2006). The leucistic Willet in this flock appeared slightly smaller than its nearby conspecifics, suggesting at first glance that it might be an Eastern Willet (*T. s. semipalmatus*), which is on average 10% smaller than the Western Willet. However, the leucistic Willet also had the long, thin, fine-tipped bill and non-sloping forehead that is characteristic of Western Willets. There is much variation and overlap in size between the two subspecies, but other traits such as body structure can be used to distinguish between them (O'Brien 2006).

The winter ranges of both subspecies are not yet completely known but do apparently overlap. Eastern Willets are believed to winter in coastal areas in the southern United States, the West Indies, and eastern South America, while Western Willets winter in coastal areas on the west and south coasts of the United States as well as in the West Indies, northern South America, and Peru (O'Brien et al. 2006a, 2006b, Oswald et al. 2016). Checklists on eBird (eBird 2019) support an overlap in the winter ranges of the two subspecies in the West Indies, although checklists for the Eastern Willet are more numerous. The eBird checklist for this observation from Ciénaga de Zapata National Park is available online, along with photographs (Sorenson 2018). Observers in the West Indies can help further clarify the non-breeding ranges of these two subspecies by learning the differences between Western and Eastern Willets—in size, structure, behavior, and vocalization—and documenting wintering Willets with photographs and notes, then finally submitting these observations to eBird Caribbean (ebird.org/caribbean).

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