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“EXTRA-REMIGIAL” FEATHERS IN A CRESTED BARBET *TRACHYPHONUS VAILLANTII*

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On 27 October 2012, I caught and ringed (4H15547) a Crested Barbet (Figure 1) at the Morgenson farm, near Marken, Elliras (23° 36' 47.9"S 28° 12' 50.1"E). It was an adult bird and looked just like any other Crested Barbet caught in the area. The mensural data of this particular individual is provided in Table 1. There was no head moult or brood patch visible whilst the tail was undergoing moult.

What was strikingly unusual about this bird was that it had two “extra-remigial” feathers; one each on the inside of each wing (Figure 2). These feathers resemble a smaller version of a flight feather and occur on the same location on both wings. None of the proper primary or secondary flight feathers are missing at these locations. These extra feathers are located just proximal to the wrist joints.

I can only speculate on the possible causes of this phenomenon. I think it would be too much of a coincidence to link these feathers with an injury or a physical birth defect of some kind or “ingrown” feathers because they occur on both wings and in the same location on each wing. It may be the result of a mutation but, since this bird’s health seems to be unaffected by these odd feathers, surely then this phenomenon should have a higher rate of occurrence? I have ringed 88 Crested Barbets and about 333 barbets in total, which gives an observed occurrence rate of 1.14% and 0.30%, respectively. But up to now, I have never observed anything like this in Crested Barbets (or Crested Barbets caught on this farm) or, for that matter, in any other species of bird.

These odd feathers appeared not to affect the bird’s health since its mass and wing length was within the ranges of that recorded for Crested Barbets (n = 88) that I have ringed (mass 57 – 98 grams, wing length 95 – 115 mm, respectively). The bird appeared to be healthy and it also flew away normally upon its release.

I have also been unable to find any literature or references on this subject so it may well be a very unusual and thus unrecorded phenomenon. Roberts 7 makes no reference to such a phenomenon (Chittenden 2005). After posting this query on the Bird Ringing and Bird Banding Facebook page, Mark Grantham, from Cornwall (UK) and working for the British Trust for Ornithology, stated that he had seen an “extra-rectricial” Blackbird, with tail feathers growing out of the base of the upper tail coverts. No explanation was provided for this phenomenon either.

Table 1. Mensural data of Crested Barbet 4H15547.

Mass (g)	Wing (mm)	Head (mm)	Culmen (mm)	Tarsus (mm)	Tail (mm)	Wing moult
69	99	51.2	24.7	28.7	85	554000000

Acknowledgements

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References

Chittenden HN. 2005. Crested Barbet. In: Roberts – Birds of Southern Africa, 7th Edition. Hockey PAR, Dean WRJ, Ryan PG (Eds.) The Trustees of the John Voelcker Bird Book Fund, Cape Town, p. 147.



Figure 1: Crested Barbet 4H15547



Figure 2: The “extra-underwing-flight-feather” on the right wing (left) and on the left wing (right) of Crested Barbet 4H15547