Melanistic mammals deviate from the recognized colour morph of the type specimen of a species by having a much darker pelage colour and absence or reduction of pelage patterns distinguished by brown or white hairs. There is a paucity of information on melanism in cervids in general and Spotted Deer Axis axis in particular. Previous record of melanism in cervids has been reported for White-tailed Deer (Odocoileus virginianus) by Wozencraft (1979); Smith et al. (1984) and Baccus & Posey (1999).

A melanistic male Spotted Deer or Chital Axis axis (Erxleben, 1777) was sighted and photographed (Fig 1) by first author at 12.43 PM on 14th January 2014 in Muthanga Forest Range (Geo-coordinates: N 11.66492, E 76.41034) of Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary of Kerala state in India. This melanistic colour morph chital was found grazing in the grassland along with two other normal colour males at a distance of approximately 300 m from our vehicle. In this particular month, bachelor herds of 40-50 chital stags were also witnessed. Antler of one normal male was grown but in velvet and another normal male was with two tines of antler in velvet while the antlers of melanistic colour morph chital had just rounded outgrowths (Fig 2). On the same day after 10 minutes’ drive further at 12.55 PM, another melanistic colour morph chital was sighted on the edge of main tourist road (Geo-coordinates: N 11.66579, E 76.38879) hardly 2 km from the Muthanga range office (Fig 3). This individual was in a herd of about 7-8 chital, mostly females. The sex of this melanistic colour morph chital could not be determined because as soon as we spotted this individual, the herd started rushing back into the thick understorey away from our vehicle. Antler was not present in this colour morph chital and pelage was blackish to dark brown in colour.

Colour morph or in some cases complete melanistic chital are rarely seen, though reported in case of White-tailed Deer (Baccus & Posey, 1999). Incidence of melanistic morphs in mammalian populations is generally rare but may vary temporally and spatially. Thus a melanistic morph of Chital is an unusual phenomenon in nature. We can only assume that this morphism may probably serve as an adaptation to the extremes of environmental variation.

Acknowledgements
We like to thank Mr. Ravi Singh, SG & CEO of WWF-India for encouragement throughout the study. We are also thankful to Drs. Dipankar Ghose and Sejal Worah for their advices and continuous support. We would like to acknowledge Mr. D. Boominathan for arranging logistics in the field site and Kerala forest department for issuing permission and support in carrying out the study.

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