

The Long-Tailed Cuckoo

Maori name—Koekoea.

(*Urodynamis taitensis*).

(By L. W. McCaskill).

Of the two species of the cuckoo family that annually visit New Zealand from regions nearer the equator, the larger long-tailed cuckoo is perhaps less well known than its smaller relative the shining cuckoo. It is not uncommon during the summer months, but appears to remain in sparsely settled bush country, is of retiring habits even in such districts, and restricts its cry mainly to the first and last hours of daylight. This cry is harsh and rasping, something like kwakwaa (with a short a as in bat) or, better still, like the Maori name "koekoea" with the last e sound drawn out. Another call has been described as "whiz-z-z-t."

This cuckoo's appearance at once suggests the description "hawk-like," and it may be this resemblance to a common enemy that arouses the anger of small birds when a koekoea is seen. It has the colour of a hawk but not its beak and feet, and so must seek safety in retreat with the flock of feathered furies in pursuit. It gains revenge in sneaking fashion by visiting unguarded nests to steal and devour eggs and sometimes even nestlings, and as if in final settlement of its score, the cuckoo may then leave its own egg to be cared for by one of the deluded victims.

Bush canaries (the whiteheads of the North Island and the yellowheads of the South) are frequently the foster-parents thus victimised. The tui has been seen attacking a cuckoo that appeared to have designs on its nest. Wood robins are also reported as foster parents and grey warblers have been seen feeding a young koekoea, but whether these tiny birds have previously fostered the large cuckoo's egg, as they do that of the shining cuckoo, is not definitely known.

Owing to lack of observation we do not know much about the egg itself. It is supposed that a cuckoo imposing upon the bush canary lays an egg somewhat resembling that of a bush canary, and

another cuckoo imposing on the robin lays an egg more like that of the robin. More observation, however, is needed on this point.

During the nesting season the favourite haunts of these birds are mostly away from the haunts of man, but they may be seen even in the neighbourhood of large towns when on migration. In the fresh adult plumage the underparts are white streaked with brown, and the upperparts dark brown spotted and barred with chestnut. In autumn birds in immature plumage are more frequently seen. In these the throat and breast are buff instead of white, and the back is spangled with white spots. Also the tail is a little shorter than in the full grown bird. They consume in their first season a prodigious number of insects and spiders.

New Zealand is the only known nesting country of the long-tailed cuckoo. In winter the species is found in various islands of the South Pacific from the Solomons in the west to Tahiti in the east. The ancient Maori explained its annual disappearance by saying that the bird shed its feathers in the autumn, turned into a lizard, and crawled into a hole in the ground and spent the winter there. There is much to be learned of the migrations and nesting habits of the long-tailed cuckoo.

The Ways of the Hedgehog

A Wellington horticulturist, who was much troubled with wood-lice (slaters) in his green-house, put in a hedgehog and a number of chickens to eat the insects. That night he slept with an easy mind, satisfied that the wood-lice were in for a bad time.

When he went next morning to view the results of his policy, he saw a happy hedgehog and headless chickens.

Hedgehogs are fond of the chicks of wild birds as well as domesticated kinds.