

Shining Cuckoo

By Brian Gill

In November 1978 I experienced a stroke of luck the like of which comes rarely during fieldwork. It was hot and sunny, and as I walked through the dry kanuka forest in my study area at Kowhai Bush near Kaikoura, the air hummed with the stridulations of cicadas.

Above the din I heard the distinctive whistling call of a shining cuckoo quite close at hand, and I went in pursuit. There is something about this cuckoo's call that makes its source very hard for the human ear to locate. It starts softly and gradually rises, so that its distance is hard to judge. Coupled with that the birds are remarkably cryptic when they perch in a tree, despite having such gaudy green colouring and boldly striped underparts.

As Eileen Duggan put it in her 1929 poem *The Pipiwhararoa (Shining Cuckoo)*:

"And I burnt my eyes with gazing.

Still I see the poplars shiver,

Still I hear the little runnels down the folded gully falling,

But I never saw the bird!"

Well I persevered and was eventually rewarded with close views of two cuckoos. It's a privilege to watch such secretive and little-known birds, but to cap it off I thought I glimpsed a colour band on one bird's leg. Something to write home about? It is when you know how few shining cuckoos have ever been colour banded.

I lost the cuckoos that day, but 10 days later I found them again in the same area.

Cuckoos have short legs which are tucked well in when they perch. Also the feathering extends much further along the leg than in song-birds, so it is very difficult to see the legs clearly to check for bands. I persisted for half an hour. Luck was with me and I eventually approached the birds to within 5 metres – closer than the binoculars would focus! There was no doubt – one of the birds had a metal band on its left leg and one red plastic band on its right. This was B-40201, banded as a nestling by me exactly two years before at a nest a kilometre away. Presumably this cuckoo had departed New Zealand on its winter migration at least once, and was now back in its natal area attempting to breed. In my three years of studying shining cuckoos at Kowhai Bush I banded only 11 nestlings and

no adults – so seeing a bird two years after banding was lucky indeed.

Glossy Cuckoos

The shining cuckoo (*Chrysococcyx lucidus*) has four breeding populations – in the south-west corner of Western Australia, in south-east Australia including Tasmania, in New Zealand, and in the New Caledonia-Vanuatu area. In the first three areas the cuckoos are absent or very rare in winter because they migrate north to the tropics. During the southern winter they are found from the Lesser Sunda Islands in Indonesia, east through New Guinea to the Solomon Islands. In the New Caledonia area the population is non-migratory. There are about 11 another species of cuckoo in the genus *Chrysococcyx* spread through Australia, south-east Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. They are the smallest of all cuckoos – shining cuckoos are sparrow-sized at about 23g. With one exception they all have bright iridescent plumage and so they are known collectively as the glossy cuckoos.

Shining cuckoos are remarkable birds on three counts – their migration, their breeding and their foods.

Spectacular Migration

Shining cuckoos from New Zealand tend to have slightly wider bills than their conspecifics from Australia. This is very convenient because the specimens that have been collected from New Britain, New Ireland and the Solomon Islands (present there during the New Zealand winter months) also tend to have wider bills than those collected to the west in New Guinea and the Lesser Sunda Islands. Thus the deduction that New Zealand shining cuckoos migrate to the New Britain-Solomons archipelago, and no further west. Note that this is deduction and not "hard fact" as might be obtained from the recovery of banded birds. Very few shining cuckoos have ever been banded, and chances of recovery are slim over huge, sparsely-populated areas like Melanesia and Australasia. Consider that thousands of European cuckoos have been banded in Europe, yet only one or two of these have ever been recovered south of the Sahara in proof of their wintering ground there. What chance do

we have in this part of the world? Perhaps in the future tiny transmitters will allow shining cuckoos to be tracked by satellite.

Many authorities have assumed that shining cuckoos migrate directly between New Zealand and the Solomons with the only possible land-falls en route at Norfolk and Lord Howe islands. If correct, this return journey of 6,000km is the most spectacular transoceanic migration by any land bird. I have measured the bill widths of more than 400 shining cuckoo specimens in museums around the world. All birds from Victoria and Tasmania were narrow-billed, but I discovered unexpectedly large numbers of wide-billed cuckoos among the narrow-billed birds from New South Wales and Queensland. The wide-billed birds had been collected only during the months of migration. Thus it seems that at least a portion of the wide-billed New Zealand population migrates via eastern Australia. This extends the return journey to about 12,000km but involves shorter oceanic stretches (just over 2,000km between New Zealand and Australia and just under 2,000km between Australia and the Solomons) and allows ample opportunity for "rest and recreation" on the Australian mainland.

The colour-banded cuckoo that I saw at Kowhai Bush had returned to its natal site (assuming it hadn't been hiding in the bush all along). Banding has shown that European cuckoos tend to return to their natal areas. It makes sense that the homing instinct should in part comprise a return to the area in which the bird was hatched. Feats of migration give us much to marvel at. As Eileen Duggan put it:

"Are the seas to you as homely as our fields of curling clover?

What old memory sends you blindly over hill and over hollow?

Do you never doubt the way?"

Parasitic Breeders

All birds in the cuckoo subfamily are brood-parasites – they do not build a nest of their own, but seek out the nests of a host species in which to deposit their eggs. The young cuckoo usually hatches before its foster siblings because cuckoos have evolved very short incubation periods for this purpose. By



The shining cuckoo's egg (right) is quite different to its host's, the grey warbler (left), yet the warbler appears not to notice. Photo: Brian Gill



A 10-day-old cuckoo (left) and a 15-day-old-cuckoo (right). By this stage it is old enough to kick its host's chicks out of the nest. Photo: Brian Gill. Opposite: Despite its striking coloration, the shining cuckoo is seldom seen in the forest. Nevertheless it is often heard. Photo: Rod Morris

