

A diverse group ranging in size from the Shining Cuckoo to the Channel-billed Cuckoo. Generally grey or brown, often with conspicuous barring, especially on the underparts; long tail with transverse bars and white notches; short bill and short legs. Sexes alike. Most lay 1 egg in nests of other insectivorous species. Young cuckoos make insistent penetrating begging calls. The adults are vocal when breeding and are more often heard than seen.

PALLID CUCKOO *Cuculus pallidus*

Rare Australian vagrant

30 cm, 85 g. Medium-sized cuckoo with long wings and tail and falcon-like profile in flight. Adult plain grey, barred only on undertail; a dark grey line passes through the eye; pale eyebrow and patch on the nape. Immature boldly marked brown and buff on head and upperparts; pale buff underparts. Feeds by swooping to ground from a perch. Male song a series of *slowly rising and accelerating melancholy notes*: 'too, too . . . too, too'. **Habitat:** Breeds Australia. Winters northern Australia, New Guinea and Indonesia. A few reach NZ, mainly in lightly forested open country. [Sp 269]



CUCKOOS

Cuculidae

About 120 species worldwide; 2 breed in New Zealand and 4 are vagrants.

Most cuckoos are parasitic, laying their eggs in nests of other insectivorous bird species and then letting the host rear the young, fledging often well after it is capable of flying well. Cuckoos lay their eggs while the host's clutch is being formed, or a day or two after completion of that clutch. The cuckoo removes one of the host's eggs and replaces it with its own. The cuckoo egg develops very rapidly and usually hatches first. The cuckoo chick then ejects all other eggs and chicks from the

nest, or simply dominates the smaller chicks and they starve to death. Young cuckoos make persistent, high-pitched begging calls even after leaving the nest, and this stimulates its foster parents and other birds of the same or different species to feed it, thus causing confusion about the true identity of the foster parents.

Cuckoos are strong fliers, and most migrate between temperate and tropical regions. During the breeding season, they are conspicuously vocal, but at other times they remain silent and cryptic.

269. PALLID CUCKOO *Cuculus pallidus*

Plate 62

Size: 30 cm, 85 g

Distribution: Breeds in southwestern, southern and eastern Australia, including Tasmania, parasitising open-nesting species such as honeyeaters and flycatchers. After breeding, they move northwards to central and northern Australia, New Guinea and the western parts of Indonesia. A rare vagrant to New Zealand with only six records: Craig Flat, Otago (one bird seen in May–October 1939, 1940 and 1941), Okarito (December 1941), Greymouth (March 1942), Wairarapa (1977), Omarama, Otago (January 1990), Riverton (1998).

Behaviour: In New Zealand, Pallid Cuckoos have usually been seen perched on power poles or fenceposts in open country, then gliding down to the ground to catch insects and earthworms. The first bird recorded in New Zealand appeared on the same farm for three years in a row during the non-breeding season. The distinctive call of the male is a monotonously repeated phrase, consisting of an ascending and accelerating series of melancholy notes: 'too too . . . too too'. The female utters a hoarse 'kheer'. **Reading:** Marples, B.J. 1942. *Notornis* 2: 10–11.