

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.

**LONG-TAILED CUCKOO (Koekoea) *Eudynamys taitensis* Locally common endemic**

40 cm, 125 g. Large brown cuckoo with very long tail. Adult has upperparts rich brown, barred black; face and underparts pale buff, boldly streaked brown and black. Juvenile has upperparts dull brown, spotted white; face and underparts buff, lightly streaked. Main call a loud harsh shriek – 'zzwheesh' – from a high perch or in flight, any time of day. In flight, tail as long as body. Usual hosts are Whitehead, Brown Creeper and Yellowhead. **Habitat:** Mainly native and exotic forest, Oct–Mar, but almost anywhere on migration. Migrates to Pacific islands. **Breeding:** Nov–Jan.

[Sp 272]



**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.

**272. LONG-TAILED CUCKOO**

***Eudynamys taitensis* Plate 62**

**Size:** 40 cm, 125 g  
**Other names:** Koekoea, Long-tailed Koel (Australia)

**Distribution:** Breeds in New Zealand only. Long-tailed Cuckoos are found throughout forests of the mainland, and on forested offshore islands such as Little Barrier, Kapiti, Codfish and Stewart. Stragglers have reached the Chathams, The Snares and Auckland Islands. In January–April, they migrate to winter in the tropical Pacific in an arc from the Bismark Archipelago and Micronesia in the west to the Marquesas and Tuamotu Islands of French Polynesia in the east, but mainly to the east of Fiji. Some migrate through the Kermadecs and Lord Howe Island, and a few pass through Norfolk Island and the east coast of Australia on their northward passage. Adults probably migrate before the juveniles. A few adults appear in the Cook Islands in mid-January, but most do not arrive until March. It seems that

yearlings remain in the wintering grounds during their first summer.

In New Zealand, the breeding distribution is governed by the distribution of the host species, the Whitehead in the North Island, and the Yellowhead and Brown Creeper in the South Island; however, during migration, birds are heard well away from the range of these species (e.g. Northland and Manawatu). A few birds overwinter in New Zealand, especially in the northern North Island, but they remain quiet and inconspicuous in winter. Adult Long-tailed Cuckoos return to New Zealand in early October, and adults return to the same site year after year.

**Population:** Widespread and sometimes moderately common, especially conspicuous in late spring and early summer.

**Conservation:** Protected endemic. The numbers of Long-tailed Cuckoos in New Zealand are probably declining in line with the decline of the host species (especially

Yellowheads) on the mainland. Clearance of subtropical rainforest in parts of their wintering range could have an impact on the numbers of Long-tailed Cuckoos visiting New Zealand.

**Breeding:** Like other cuckoos, Long-tailed Cuckoos parasitise other breeding birds by laying their eggs in nests of other species, and so take no part in the incubation of their eggs or in raising their young. Despite anecdotal reports of Long-tailed Cuckoos laying eggs in the nests of a wide variety of birds, including Robins, Fantails, Silvereyes and Tomtits, clearly the main host species are the Whitehead in the North Island, Yellowhead in the South Island, and the Brown Creeper on the South, Codfish and Stewart Islands. Banding has shown that Long-tailed Cuckoos return to the same general area each year. Little is known of the social behaviour of Long-tailed Cuckoos, but they may have a lek-type breeding system, because groups of adults (possibly males) gather to call and Long-tailed Cuckoos are not encountered in simple pairs.

Laying is from mid-November to mid-December. They lay a single creamy-white or very pale pink egg (23 x 17 mm) covered in brownish blotches. It is noticeably larger than those of the host but is usually accepted. The incubation period is estimated to be c. 16 days. The cuckoo chick evicts the host's eggs and chicks and is then raised alone. The fledging period is estimated to be c. 21 days,

and the fledgling begs incessantly and is then fed by both foster parents and their helpers for at least 4 weeks, before the young becomes independent. Juvenile Long-tailed Cuckoos migrate to winter in the tropics and probably remain there until at least 2 years old.

**Behaviour:** The arrival of Long-tailed Cuckoos in late spring is often heralded by their harsh, piercing, long-drawn-out shriek: 'zzwheesh', heard at night as birds migrate southward. This is also the typical daytime call during the breeding season, but they also give a loud, rapid, ringing chatter: 'zip, zip, zip, zip', or 'rrrrp pe-pe-pe-pe-pe'. When calling, they usually sit on a high perch in the canopy. When giving the shriek call in combination with the chatter call, they often display by fanning their tail, slowly flapping their wings and adopting a hunched posture. Several birds (possibly males) gather in a tight group only a few metres apart as they display, and others (possibly females) watch from 20–30 m away. Long-tailed Cuckoos continue to call into January and February, well after breeding has finished, and they are also vocal during their northward migration. They are a relatively common casualty from flying into windows.

**Feeding:** Diet is mainly large invertebrates such as weta, stick insects, spiders, beetles and bugs. Skinks, geckos, small birds, eggs, nestlings, berries and fruit are also taken.

**Reading:** McLean, I.G. 1988. *Notornis* 35: 89–98.