

## A CUCKOO IN THE NEST.

By Mrs. A. S. Wilkinson, Levin.

Only once during our 18 years' stay on Kapiti Island did we have the chance to photograph a young long-tailed cuckoo (*Eudynamis taitensis*) in the nest of a whitehead (*Mohoua albicilla*). Other whitehead's nests were found in plenty, but any that might have held a cuckoo's egg were either far too high or in otherwise unsuitable positions for photography.

Once an egg of a long-tailed cuckoo was taken from an awkwardly placed nest and introduced into a more easily accessible one, but the whitehead would have none of it and it was promptly ejected, to be shattered in a thousand pieces on the ground below, to our great annoyance. So there was general excitement when at last a whitehead's nest was located by our daughter (Mrs. R. H. D. Stidolph) in a small-leaved coprosma, about six feet from the ground. In the nest was a young long-tailed cuckoo which we judged to be then about a week old. This was on January 16, 1936.

The next few days after this interesting discovery were very cold, with wind and rain, but on the 20th it cleared up and no time was lost by my husband in building a stage so that the camera would be on a slightly higher level than the nest. A photograph was taken that day of the young cuckoo which by now was a well-feathered fine-looking bird, but the whiteheads resented the presence of the camera, and myself, and it was not until the 24th that the first picture of the male bird feeding its foster chick was taken, and then only after a wait of three hours.

I was very disappointed by the suspicious behaviour of this pair of whiteheads. At other nests I had found them very trustful, taking little or no notice of the camera. Of course birds do vary in temperament, and it was just bad luck for me that this particular pair should be so cautious. Back and forth, and in and out they would go through the bushes in a most tantalising manner, each carrying a mouthful of insects, sometimes sneaking furtively up behind the nest and trying to feed the eager youngster through a tangled barrier of leafy twigs.

As the chick grew bigger and stronger it would endeavour to scramble out of the nest to receive its meal, and in this way I was repeatedly cheated of what might have been a very good picture. When the whiteheads did pluck up enough courage to venture round to the front of the nest they were in such a hurry to feed and be gone that I had to be very much on the alert and ready to snap on the instant. Plunging its head far into the gaping mouth one would think required a lot of courage on the part of the whitehead and the cuckoo would often make a snap after the departing bird as though it would swallow it. It certainly looked a formidable and bad tempered youngster and would snap at passing flies and at my fingers if I ventured to touch it, giving at the same time a harsh squeak. But it really did have some excuse for its peevishness when it could see and hear its foster parents hovering so near and failing to deliver the goods.

The hours I spent waiting at the nest were full of interest and from where I stood at the foot of the scaffold that held the camera, I was partly

hidden from view and sheltered from the sun, but could watch all the manoeuvres of the whiteheads trying to dodge coming directly in front of the lens, and listen to the various calls the young cuckoo used to encourage them to hurry up and attend to its wants. When it could hear them approaching, though still some distance away, it would sit up alertly listening and call eagerly, "cheep, cheep"—notes which closely resemble the whitehead's own, but when the birds were very near it would give a note resembling the winding up of a watch spring, very similar to that used by the young whitehead—"whir-r-r-r." This use of notes so like those of the whitehead, is, I think, one of the many strange and mysterious things about the cuckoo. It may be that having the ability to so mimic the whiteheads (though more probably the notes come naturally) the little cuckoo makes a stronger appeal to its foster parents and urges them to greater efforts to supply the needs of the ever hungry babe that has been so unjustly thrust upon them—and at the cost of their own rightful brood. If they had only behaved more naturally and not been so camera-shy I would have learnt more about their ways of bringing up their huge foster chick.



Photo. Mrs. A. S. Wilkinson.

WHITEHEAD ABOUT TO FEED YOUNG LONG-TAILED CUCKOO,  
KAPITI ISLAND.

By the 27th, the young cuckoo was getting very restless and impatient, and next day it was scrambling off the nest and seemed quite ready to leave. On the 29th it could only be induced to stay in the nest, which by this time was flattened out of shape—by packing twigs round it and this was the last day on which I attempted to photograph it. On the 31st it was out of the nest but sitting in the same little coprosma

that had sheltered it for probably three weeks, and from there the cuckoo must have flown some distance away, for I never saw it again.

#### SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES.

By R. H. D. Stidolph, Masterton.

It was my good fortune to be on holiday at Kapiti Island when the above nest was found and before Mrs. Wilkinson took her photographs several days later, I made a few random observations of the feeding and brooding of the young cuckoo.

When the nest was found (January 16) the young cuckoo filled it completely and rested with its head over its shoulder.. Its rat-like eye, enormous orange-coloured gape and hawk-like bill were conspicuous features of its make-up.

The adult whiteheads approached the nest very quietly and without haste and fed the youngster without making a sound, but immediately the bird was fed one adult bird sang and twittered before departing.

On January 17 the weather was very windy after heavy rain. I arrived at the nest late in the afternoon. At 4.13 p.m. the cuckoo was fed by one whitehead, which slipped quietly on the nest and brooded the youngster for 25 minutes when the other adult arrived and fed the chick. Both whiteheads then left and returned 12 minutes later, at 4.50 p.m., when one bird fed the cuckoo, sat on it for a minute and then left when the other adult arrived to feed the youngster. A cicada was seen amongst the food fed to the cuckoo.

The next day, January 18, the cuckoo, during a short period I spent at the nest, was fed by one adult at intervals of five minutes (three periods) and after a lapse of ten minutes it was fed by both adults which arrived at the nest together. A caterpillar was noticed among the food fed to the cuckoo. Unfortunately I had to leave the island that day.

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DUCKLINGS FALLING OVER CLIFF.—In October, as Mr. Corkran was working in the Woodhaugh Quarry, beside the Leith, Dunedin, he saw a wild duck walking backwards and forwards quacking at the foot of a 60ft. cliff in the quarry. Hearing a "plop" near him he looked around, and discovered that it had been made by a young duckling landing on the ground at the foot of the cliff. The adult duck guided the young one to the safety of a bush about three yards away, and then returned to resume her quacking at the foot of the cliff. Presently another duckling appeared from the top of the cliff, and, on landing at the bottom, it too was guided to the sheltering bush. In all, five ducklings estimated to be no more than three days old, made this hazardous trip. With wings spread, down they came at short intervals, and when about two and a half feet from the ground, the tiny creatures turned in the air and landed on their backs. Three made the landing safely, one was stunned but soon recovered, and one was killed. The adult waited for a while as if to see if the dead duckling would recover from its fall, but it showed no signs of life, and the adult collected the other four young ones, which on their descent had been led one by one to the safety of the bush. The family made its way to the waters of the Leith.—Mrs. I. Tily, Dunedin.