REARING OF LONG-TAILED CUCKOO.

By J. M. Cunningham, Masterton.

As so little is known of the egg and early life history of the long-tailed cuckoo **(Eudynamis taitensis)** an examination of published literature and certain unpublished material seems desirable. In view of the still widespread belief that the grey warbler **(Pseudogerygone igata)** is one of the foster-parents of this cuckoo, it is advisable first to point out that references in Oliver ("New Zealand Birds," 1930) and Hutton and Drummond ("The Animals of New Zealand," 1923) have apparently been taken from earlier publications. Their authenticity is thus no greater than the original references. As a case in point, Hutton and Drummond, in speaking of the long-tailed cuckoo egg, give a valid description of the well-known shining (or bronze) cuckoo **(Chalcites lucidus)** egg, of which there is no confusion.

The first doubts were raised by Robert Fulton, who, in an exhaustive article (Trans. N.Z. Inst., vol. xxvi, 1903) states that he is "convinced that the warbler rarely, if ever, hatches the egg of **Urodynamis.**" Later he states that he can find "no instance of a young one being found in the nest of that bird (i.e., the warbler) and but a single occurrence of a supposed egg." This "supposed" egg was sent to Sir Walter Buller ("A History of the Birds of New Zealand," 2nd Ed., 1888) by the Rev. Taylor, of Wanganui, but it is not stated from what nest it had been removed, nor is the reason for believing it to be a long-tailed cuckoo's given. (See on.) Its description was "almost spherical in shape, with a slightly rough or granulate surface, of a pale buff or yellowish-brown colour; length, 1.25in., breadth 1.15in." (31.8 x 29.2 m.m.) Buller continues: "A specimen in the Canterbury Museum taken by Mr. Smith from a warbler's nest at Oamaru in November, 1885, corresponds exactly with mine (which is now in the Colonial Museum at Wellington) except that it is slightly narrower." A third egg is also considered by Buller, who stated that Mr. W. W. Smith found an egg "almost round in shape with a deeper shade of colour than the specimen in the Canterbury Museum" (unfortunately no size is given) in the nest of a wood robin. This egg was stated to have hatched into a long-tailed cuckoo.

These three rather dubious records appear to be the only ones on which was based the early description of the long-tailed cuckoo egg. In addition, it is noteworthy that the second egg described is, in all the extensive literature, the only egg claimed to be a long-tailed cuckoo's, taken from a warbler's nest, and from the quotation we are left with the impression that this egg was believed to be a long-tailed cuckoo's only because of its similarity with the first egg. That this egg was itself not necessarily a long-tailed cuckoo's at all is pointed out by Edgar Stead (The Egg of the Long-tailed Cuckoo, Trans. Roy. Soc. N.Z., vol. 66, 1936). He quotes Buller (I am unable to trace the original reference) as saying "I ought to state, however, that it (presumably the egg sent by the Rev. Taylor) was obtained from a native and that its authenticity cannot be considered to be quite certain." Thus, upon this questionable egg has arisen the whole legend of the hatching of the long-tailed cuckoo by the grey warbler!

The quotations above are not accepted as beyond question by either Fulton or Stead, and the descriptions of the eggs are strangely at variance with what Fulton believed to be a true long-tailed cuckoo egg. He is, however, not greatly perturbed by this difference, pointing out that much variability takes place in parasitic birds' eggs in other parts of the world, but he does describe an egg which he thinks is "undoubtedly" that of the long-tailed cuckoo. It was found in a tomtit's **(Petroica macrocephala)** nest and was "white with purplish-brown speckles, becoming thicker and darker at the larger end. It is something like that of the native canary **(Mohoua ochrocephala)** but is more elliptical in shape—I should call it ovoido-elliptical—and its length is 0.94in., and its breadth 0.7in." (23.9 x 17.8 mm.)

Stead also described eggs taken from nests of the whitehead **(Mohoua o. albicilla)**, brown creeper **(Finschia novaeseelandiae)**, song thrush **(Turdus ericetorum)** and greenfinch **(Chloris chloris)**. All these eggs correspond in size and shape with that described by Fulton, and there can be little doubt that this is the normal egg of the long-tailed cuckoo. (A fuller description is given by Stead.) Proof that the creeper is victimised by this cuckoo is given by Stead, who found a young long-tailed cuckoo in a brown creeper's nest. He also pointed out that Buller (Supplement to the Birds of New Zealand, vol. 2, 1905) had scouted the idea that the creeper might be a foster parent.

The only other recent reference to an egg of the long-tailed cuckoo is that of Mr. A. S. Wilkinson (Emu, xxvi, 1936) whose description of an egg found in a whitehead's nest on Kapiti Island also agrees with the last-mentioned examples in every respect.

In addition, I found an egg at Kiriwhakapapa, Tararua Ranges, on January 5, 1946, in a deserted silver-eye **(Zosterops lateralis)** nest. I described it at the time as "very pale pink in ground colour, slightly darker at the larger end, thickly blotched at that end and more sparingly at the smaller end, with purplish brown; size, 24 x 17.8 mm." A few days later I examined eggs in Stead's collection, and these, stated by him to be long-tailed cuckoo eggs, corresponded exactly with mine. Since that time a similar egg has been found in a deserted silver-eye nest, and evidence that this species is victimised in that district is presented (see this issue page 175) by Mr R. H. D. Stidolph, who found a young long-tailed cuckoo in a silver-eye nest.

As Fulton recognised, cuckoo eggs sometimes show amazing variation in size and colouring in the nests of various species (see Gronvold's plate in British Birds, Kirkman and Jourdain, 1944 ed., plate 184), but in view of the similarity of the eggs described by Fulton, Stead, Wilkinson and myself in nests of so many different species, it seems unlikely that there is in fact such great variation in the New Zealand species.

It is difficult to understand such instances at Johannes Andersen (New Zealand Song Birds, 1926) quotes, when he says that a Mr. Overton, of Otago, actually saw a long-tailed cuckoo lay its egg on the ground, carry it in its beak and deposit it in a warbler's nest. Although similar procedure used to be widely attributed to the English cuckoo, it is now generally discredited. In "British Birds" (Witherby et al., vol 2, 1945) appears the following: "All reliable evidence goes to show that the cuckoo **(Cuculus c. cuculus)** either lays directly into the nest, or when the entrance is too small, raises herself with outspread wing and tail against the opening and ejects her egg into the nest, though not invariably successfully. It is very significant that in those cases where the egg falls to the ground or rests on the edge of the nest without rolling into it, it is left lying there. . . It was formerly believed that eggs found in nests in covered sites or with small entrances must necessarily have been inserted by the bill, and all credit is due to Chance for being the first to realise that the method is approximately the same in all cases."

Regarding feeding of young long-tailed cuckoos by warblers, Fulton seems to take it for granted that Buller is correct in assuming this to be the case. Buller's only evidence, however, is his casual remark in brackets, "as many witnesses can testify" and (in the Supplement) "innumerable well-authenticated cases all over the country." It is significant that since these "innumerable" cases were reported by Buller, no competent ornithologist has ever witnessed the event, although the feeding of the young shining cuckoo by warblers is of common occurrence, and I entirely share Stidolph's belief (Emu, vol. xxxix, 1939) that these reported instances are cases of mistaken identity, and offer the following as examples of how such mistakes can arise. Early this year a friend of mine, for whose observations I have the highest regard, told me he had seen a warbler feeding a young long-tailed cuckoo. The bird, however, proved to be a shining cuckoo. Again, on February 10,

1949, Mrs. R. H. D. Stidolph watched a young shining cuckoo investigate a deserted and damaged sparrow's nest, which it entered. The bird snuggled down in the nest and was fed there by a warbler. One can easily imagine how an inexperienced observer would readily assume, quite wrongly, that this cuckoo was being reared in a sparrow's nest. In such a manner has the legend of the relationship between the long-tailed cuckoo and grey warbler arisen. Buller himself said that the illustration by Keulemans of a young long-tailed cuckoo being fed by a warbler had the appearance of an exaggeration, and I believe he was misled by similar reports to those quoted above. In addition Keulemans had himself seen a species of young cuckoo fed by a variety of birds in West Africa, and would be only too ready to believe that such would take place with our cuckoos. It is well-known that young shining cuckoos (and probably young long-tailed cuckoos also) are often surrounded by excited birds of many species, and the close approach of one may give the impression of feeding. It must be admitted, of course, that on odd occasions a morsel of food might be offered without this necessarily becoming an habitual occurrence. Even if satisfactory proof were offering that such occasions were numerous that is no justification for assuming that the bird fed had actually been reared by the warbler.

SUMMARY.

(1) The egg of the long-tailed cuckoo **(Eudynamis taitensis)** is as described by Fulton and in more detail by Stead, and shows little variation in size or colouring in nests of various species.

(2) There is no reliable evidence to show that the egg is ever laid in the nest of the grey warbler **(Pseudogerygone igata).**

(3) Suggestions that this cuckoo is fed either regularly or fortuitously by the warbler are probably based on cases of mistaken identity for the shining or bronze cuckoo **(Chalcites lucidus).**

A WANDERING TATTLER.

By H. R. McKenzie, Clevedon.

At Kawa Kawa Bay, Clevedon, a wandering tattler has been present from mid-August, 1948, up to the present, July, 1949. It is undoubtedly **Heteroscelus incanus incanus,** and is the third recorded occurrence in the New Zealand area. Oliver, in "New Zealand Birds," states that two were shot on Portland Island, Hawke's Bay, in 1883, and one was shot at Sunday Island in the Kermadec group, in 1913. There is no record of the grey-tailed tattler, **H. i. brevipes,** having been known in this country though it is fairly common in North Australia.

The bird was first noticed as an unusual shore bird in mid-August, 1948, by Mr. W. Pratt, a resident, who told me of it when we met at Clevedon two weeks later. Petrol was scarce, the distance was eleven miles, and I did not expect that it would have stayed, so I did not go to look for it. On November 8, I saw Mr. Pratt again, and he told me that the bird was still there. He gave an excellent description of its appearance and its call. I lost no further time, went to the Bay the next day, November 9, and saw the bird quite closely with a good telescope. I did not know it, so got in touch by telephone with Mr. E. G. Turbott, ornithologist at the War Memorial Museum, at Auckland. Mr. Turbott suggested from my description, that it should be a tattler. Book references soon proved that he was correct. From this time it has been seen frequently by many observers. Since May, 1949, however, it has not been seen so regularly, having evidently found another spot where it spends part of its time. Mr. W. P. Mead, of Castlecliff, Wanganui, on November 30, obtained good photographs, using a telephoto lens.