

ORIENTAL CUCKOO (*CUCULUS SATURATUS HORSFIELDI*) AT KAIHINU, WEST COAST

By P. GRANT

This bird was first noticed by Master Russell Cook about 12th January, 1964, and was reported in the *Greymouth Evening Star* on 25th January, 1964, after it had been identified by Russell's father, Mr. G. S. Cook. Messrs. E. W. Crack, P. Grant, A. B. Munden and D. Panckhurst joined in observations which were made until the bird disappeared about 3rd February, 1964. These notes are made up from combined observations of all these persons. The bird was photographed successfully in both colour and monochrome.

Mr. Cook's farm is at Kaihinu, three miles north-east of Hokitika, Westland. The homestead is about twelve chains from the coast line and has a number of macrocarpa trees of moderate height, as well as several lower bushes. The surrounding country is fairly open, with grass paddocks. The Hokitika-Greymouth railway line runs between the homestead and the main road, and the passing railway traffic at times scared the bird to another homestead about three hundred yards away.

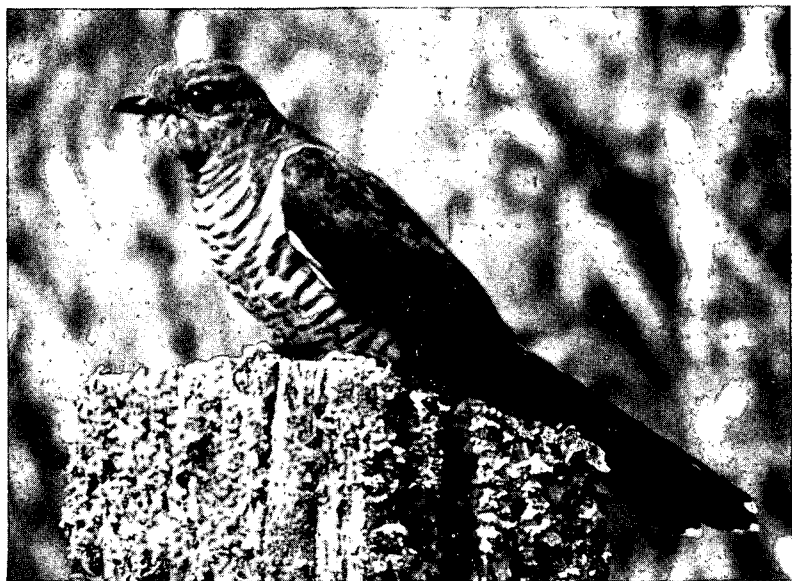
Some difficulty was caused by the fact that the bird was moulting, evidently changing from immature to mature plumage. Description as follows:— Upper mandible dark slate-grey until near the grey-green base; lower mandible grey-green; cutting edge orange; gape orange. Bill slightly down curved, shortish; nostrils prominent, black. Eyelids yellow; iris light brown; pupil dark. Lores greyish, flecked white; chin and upper throat covered by prominent greyish white beard which was faintly tinged brown when viewed from the front; malar region grey-brown; ear coverts light brown flecked white over blue grey; eyebrow bluish white (actually new feathers replacing previously brown feathers contrasting with brown feathers which had not yet moulted); side neck faintly barred brown-white over blue-grey. Forehead centre brownish, sides blue grey; nape and hind neck brownish-grey, mostly white flecked (light-brown barred faintly white, tips of feathers white, moulting to blue-grey). Mantle blue-grey, overtones barred brown, moulting; back blue-grey, overtones light brown; rump blue-grey, overtone light brown in a few places; upper tail coverts brownish flecked white; tail — centre tail feather slate-black, seven white spots longitudinally, three basal ones paired, faintly margined white, stitched effect; tail feathers white tips. Other tail feathers white spotted near base, very faintly white stitched on margins; under tail spotted white (large spots) roughly barred effect. Apparently eight spots when tail closed. Outer tail feathers more brownish in colour. Breast, foreneck and lower throat white barred brown, thin bars, which sometimes appeared slate-black; belly barred in same fashion; then short area of white before under tail coverts which were white with brown bars wide apart. Flank white, barred brown; legs and feet orange; claws light brown. Scapulars blue grey and brown feathers; lesser, median, and greater wing coverts blue-grey and brown mixed, with tendency to barred effect; primary coverts light brown; primaries brown with white spots on leading edges of several outer feathers; secondaries brown, second and third outers



I (a)



I (b)



I (c)

[P. Grant

I — Oriental Cuckoo, (a) and (c) showing variation in stance, (b) showing pattern of under-surface.

white spots on leading edge; under wing white barred brown, carpal joint area white, with white edge sometimes showing above carpal joint when wing in closed position. Wing length with wing closed — wing tip reached just beyond mid length of tail; overall length of bird about twelve and one half inches. More briefly, an apparently plumpish bird coloured brown on upper surfaces, barred brown on white on under surfaces and around neck, tail blackish with white spots, tipped white.

One of the features of the bird was the variety of positions it adopted. On pointed posts it would droop until it appeared to be the top of the post (Plate 1a). On flat-topped posts if it landed on the near edge it would take up an almost vertical position. If it landed on the flat top of a post it would take up a much flatter stance (Plate 1c), and at times would raise its tail above the horizontal. Viewed from different angles very widely different impressions as to shape could be obtained, and frontal views could give the impression that the bird was much shorter in length than it really was. Also, the impression was gained at times that the wings were too large and ungainly for the bird and that they were just drooping around. The carpal joint was frequently hidden under the breast feathers.

As the bird was moulting it could be expected to sit around quite a bit, and this it did. It did not like wet or rough weather and apparently took shelter, coming out immediately when the weather cleared. Its favourite spot was on sheltered fence posts about four feet high, and here it would sit for relatively long periods then half glide and fly to the ground. When alighting into longer grass it kept its wings outspread and propped on the grass, reaching down to pick up its food. The return flight to fence posts was direct, with a final upward glide. Generally, the bird flew in a leisurely fashion, but on one occasion when caught in smoke from a train took off at terrific speed — it could fly very fast if it wanted to. The feeding habits may be likened to those of a kingfisher on dry land. Frequently it caught a green cicada which it would take back to a post top, and Russell, who saw the bird very clearly from close range at times, said he never saw it with a brown cicada, both green and brown being common at the time. Worms were taken also, and the bird was watched from close range as it rolled up a worm into a ball in its bill before swallowing it. A moth may have been taken, and spider web on the bird may have indicated that the bird was catching spiders but it could have passed through a web inadvertently.

The bird was completely silent. No call or whistle was heard at any time.

Our first impression was that we had observed an immature Oriental Cuckoo which was in the process of moulting, and regarded it as the rufous phase as recorded in Oliver's *New Zealand Birds*, 2nd ed., p. 537, because of the barred neck. The description there did not seem to make it clear whether the rufous phase was an immature phase or not. Correspondence with Mr. K. A. Hindwood of Australia brought the information that all immature Oriental Cuckoos are barred right up the neck, and that the so-called rufous phase was apparently an immature phase.* This appears to be borne out by the fact that the bird's head was generally changing from brown to blue-grey and if the bird had stayed longer we may have been fortunate enough to

witness the blue-grey plumage. Mr. Cook, who saw the bird for the longest period, said that he thought that the bird was changing from brown to blue-grey in colour.

The question arises as to why the bird should be seen in New Zealand as previous sightings have been very few. A reason may be worked out with the help of the following brief reports. Another bird, apparently similar to the Kaihinu bird in habits, was seen at the same time in a district perhaps some twenty miles away but this report has not yet been followed up. At Greymouth, a smaller cuckoo (possibly a Fan-tailed Cuckoo) was seen on 30th December, 1963. From Jacobs River area comes the report of a strange cuckoo-like bird seen in January, 1964, and from Manakauaia (a little north of Jacobs River) the report of an Australian Tree Martin seen in December, 1963, and still there in mid-January, 1964. It is apparent that a number of birds from the Australian area were brought to this country by the succession of strong westerly winds which blew over the West Coast in December, 1963. It is unlikely that they were in sufficient numbers to breed here.

* The question of rufous phases was discussed with Mr. E. G. Turbott, who said that the rufous phase is finally an adult plumage. This means that the bird mentioned was not in rufous phase plumage but was a normal immature bird changing into adult plumage. Mr. K. A. Hindwood apparently linked the Rufous Phase mentioned in Oliver, second edition, p. 537, with immaturity because of the barred throat. He stated that he had written without going into literature regarding the matter and apparently had forgotten or was unaware of the adult Rufous Phase cuckoos. This clearly explains the difference in the two opinions.



SHORT NOTES

MARSH SANDPIPER IN SOUTH TARANAKI

On 1st November, 1963, while I was visiting a freshwater pond on the coastal side of Hawera in the company of F. Finer, M. Bysouth and G. Macdonald, an unusual bird was noticed on the coastal end of the pool. It appeared to be resting while standing in the shallows, and while F.F., M.B. and G.M. kept binoculars trained on it, I was able to approach to at least 30ft. before the bird showed signs of annoyance. From here, I secured three colour transparencies of the bird, using a telephoto lens. These have enabled it to be identified as a Marsh Sandpiper (*Tringa stagnatilis*) by R. B. Sibson and H. R. McKenzie, both of whom made observations of the other two New Zealand records of Marsh Sandpiper, in the Auckland area, in 1959 and 1963 (*Notornis* VIII, 125-126, and X, 235-236).

The bird had a slim, streamlined appearance in keeping with the diagrams in Witherby's 'Handbook of British Birds,' and Bannerman's 'Birds of the British Isles,' Vol. X, Plate 10. It was generally white except for grey upper surface and wings, the mantle and scapulars appearing speckled grey-brown. The face was white, the crown shaded, and it was somewhat dark around the eyes. The bill was noticeably long, thin, and needle-like. The legs were very long, straight, and, like the bill, appeared to be dark (the sun was overhead, being midday). The bill and legs do not resemble those of any similar bird depicted in Witherby (e.g. Greenshank, P. 320). I did not note the colour of rump or tail but F.F. remarked later that it appeared to have some white on the upper surface when it took to flight.