

# THE DATES OF ARRIVAL OF THE SHINING CUCKOO IN NEW ZEALAND IN 1952.

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## INTRODUCTION.

The shining cuckoo is one of the two migratory cuckoos reaching New Zealand regularly. Arrival dates for a particular district often appear to be fairly regular from year to year, but in some years wide discrepancy is shown. It is probable that the cuckoos arrive in batches over a considerable period rather than in a continual stream, and that the first large groups arrive at a fairly consistent date in September. It is equally probable that the numerous scattered August records are of odd birds, and that these do not represent the arrival of great numbers of birds. While a single bird may often be recorded in a district, there may be no further records there for a week or two, and it is felt that the distinction between these first odd arrivals and the main flood of birds has not been sufficiently considered in the past.

As Fell (1947, *Trans. Roy. Soc. N.Z.*, 76.4:504-515) points out (p. 505) "reports [of initial appearance] were scattered over a period of some fifty years and could not be compared with one another; for it is futile to attempt to correlate observations made in one district in one year with those made elsewhere in a different year." He, therefore, analysed 223 records in 1945, but made the mistake of generalising on these records of a single year, concluding (p. 509) that "the first birds arrive in the north and north-east of the North Island in early August, and thereafter the cuckoo gradually spreads south and westward, conforming to the general south-westward orientation of New Zealand."

Earlier nature writers, notably James Drummond, recorded in newspaper columns the birds' arrival in many of the same districts over a period of years, and it is felt that this annual recording in the same districts is the method most likely to give us an adequate picture of the arrival of the birds in New Zealand. Recent writers have given local records in their nature columns: and a great many dates are given in the "classified notes" published by the Ornithological Society of New Zealand in its bulletins. But there has been no concerted effort since Drummond wrote many years ago in newspapers to collect records annually from all parts of the country, and it is felt that this would be a useful project. The writer, therefore, launched a pilot scheme in 1952, to be repeated with modifications in 1953, and if any success is indicated, it will be suggested that the Ornithological Society make the scheme a "permanent investigation" on a similar footing with its ringing scheme, nest records and beach patrol schemes (*vide Notornis*).

## METHOD OF INQUIRY.

On September 17, 1952, the "Weekly News" published a letter from the writer asking readers to advise him when they first recorded the shining cuckoo. The letter included the following extracts: "The arrival of the shining cuckoo in New Zealand after its winter absence has not excited the same interest in this country as perhaps does 'the first cuckoo of spring' in England. Nevertheless, a good many people do notice the event. . . The validity of cuckoo records has to be checked rather carefully, and every attempt should be made to see the birds rather than to rely on song alone, which is often mistakenly reported and can be confused with that of other birds. An attempt to see a singing bird is the first step in being self-critical and in ensuring the correctness of records. . ."

On September 3, a circular was sent to the regional organisers of the Ornithological Society and a number of other members, 21 in all, asking for their help. They were requested to watch their local papers for published records, or to write asking for them, and further, to contact persons reporting first arrivals and form an opinion as to the reliability of the observers. Special emphasis was placed on an attempt to discuss other birds with the observers to find out if they "knew their birds." In response to this, regional organisers and members forwarded many reports, most of

them carefully "vetted" for correctness, and these have, in general, been accepted. "Weekly News" readers' reports have been considered carefully and a few rejected. A statement that "I heard the first shining cuckoo on September 20" was not accepted from a person not known to me unless the letter also included information on other birds in the district (as many did), which gave an indication as to whether or not the writer was familiar with birds in general. Much correspondence with some observers was necessary before such an opinion could be formed. Records were also extracted from classified notes in *Notornis* (1953, 5.3:199) as these are from regular contributors. The number of reports here considered is, however, small, 83, but it is hoped to have reports from most of the same persons in subsequent years, and thus ensure some uniformity of observations, which, over a number of years, will show the general trend of arrival dates.

#### SUMMARY OF FIRST RECORDS.

The following records are grouped together under dates, from north to south. All reports considered (five were rejected) are included, but the first report from each major locality is given in black type. Of the majority of records, including all the early ones, I am satisfied as to their authenticity. There are a few, however, mainly referring to the flood of arrivals at the end of September and October, from persons not known to me and who gave no evidence on which I could judge the reliability of their observations. The majority of these are probably correct, but are nevertheless, shown in brackets.

##### August—

- 7—**Rapahoe Range** (six miles north of Greymouth).
- 8—Rapahoe Range.
- 9—Rapahoe Range.
- 10—Rapahoe Range and Paroa (seven miles south of Greymouth).
- 16—Gisborne.
- 20—**Stewart Island.**
- 27—**Ahipara** (near Kaitaia, North Auckland).

##### September—

- 10—**Whangarei** (several reports).
- 11—Gisborne (two reports). **Clevedon** (Ness Valley).
- 12—Haldane (49 miles south-east of Invercargill).
- 15—Gisborne (15 miles south-west). **Tolaga Bay.**
- 16—[Gisborne.] Clevedon (Whakatiri).
- 17—**Takaka** (seven miles east).
- 18—**Waimauku** (29 miles north of Auckland).
- 19—**Wanganui.** [Wanganui. (Okioia, five miles south.)]
- 20—**New Plymouth** (Pukekura Park, 2 reports). [Tolaga Bay.] **Oruru.**
- 21—New Plymouth (two reports). **Dunedin** (Leith Valley).
- 22—[Gisborne. (Waimata, 17 miles).] Gisborne. Dunedin.
- 23—Clevedon (Moumoukai).
- 24—**Lake Waikaremoana. Lake Okataina.** [Wellsford.]
- 25—Nelson (two reports).
- 26—[**Canvastown.** (32 miles north-west of Blenheim.)] Clevedon.
- 27—**Levin.** Dunedin (Leith Valley, 2 reports).
- 28—Nelson. Clevedon (2 reports). Clevedon (Moumoukai). Dunedin.
- 29—[Warkworth.] [Tolaga Bay.] [Gisborne.] [Morere.] Nelson.
- 30—[Waiheke Island.] Auckland (Howick 2 reports and Manurewa). Wanganui. Nelson. [Waikouaiti.]

##### October—

- 2—[**Rotorua.** **Waikanae.** [Inglewood.] Dunedin.
- 4—**Orongorongo** (Wellington). [Dunedin.] Lake Manapouri.
- 5—[Rotorua. (Kaingaroa.)] **Masterton** (Te Whiti). Waikawa.
- 6—Tokomaru Bay. [Lower Hutt.] Wellington. [Haldane.]
- 7—Gisborne (Hangaroa). **Masterton** (Mt. Bruce).
- 9—[Auckland.]
- 11—[Gisborne.]
- 12—[Auckland.] **Masterton** (town).
- 13—Near Hoopers Inlet, Otago.
- 19—[Stirling.] 23—Castlecliff. 26—Auckland.

## DISCUSSION.

For the purpose of discussion, records have been grouped in weekly periods commencing in August. In order to present a simplified picture, records are shown mainly on a provincial basis.

Week ending.	No. of reports recd. for N.Z.	Locality.
Aug. 7	1	Westland.
14	4	Westland.
21	2	Gisborne; Stewart Island.
28	1	Far North Auckland.
Sept. 4	0	
11	4 (and "several")	Whangarei, Auckland.
18	7	Nelson, Southland.
25	18	Taranaki, Lake Waikaremoana, Dunedin.
Oct. 2	26	Wellington, Marlborough.
9	13	Wairarapa.
Later	7	Various.

In any discussion of arrival dates it must be realised that there are many uncertain factors. In some areas there is a paucity of observers. In general (as a bird is not often seen without attention having first been drawn to it by its song) the records really present first songs of the birds, and if there is any interval between the birds' arrival and the commencement of song, this cannot at present be assessed. There is also the doubt that people who are not known may be in error in their observations and the only sure way of overcoming this is to accept records only of people widely recognised as competent observers. However, this would limit the records to far fewer, and it is felt that the methods adopted enable an accurate assessment of the validity of the records.

It will be seen that the first arrivals were reported from widely separated areas, at dates usually looked on as very early. There is little justification for reading any pattern into their distribution. As this paper is concerned with first arrivals only, it is obvious that it can be stated that in 1952 small numbers of shining-cuckoos reached New Zealand in August, but there was a progressive increase of records during September, with a peak in the last week of the month. It will be noticed that all the earlier records are from coastal areas, the first really inland records being September 24. Though there is a preponderance of observers in towns near the coast, the possibility is not excluded of the birds' settling immediately they reach land. There is some evidence for this through reports of tired and exhausted birds having been seen on the ground. These reports, as far as I am aware at present, are invariably from coastal areas. This raises the interesting point that several rather early records are from Gisborne, on the east coast, and if the birds made their first landfall there, they would appear to have been flying to the west, i.e., at right angles to the direct line of flight. In a study of the mechanics of migration, it is of importance to know whether a bird has a tendency to fly to a certain point on the globe, or whether it has a tendency to fly in a particular direction. In the former case, as a bird is blown off its course it will be able to reorient itself and eventually reach the point headwind. In the latter case, if blown off its direct course it will continue to fly in the same direction, and thus never reach its goal. In continental areas this is difficult to determine because wind drift is not so important to a migrating bird which may progress at only 30-40 miles a day by feeding en route, and rarely becoming really airborne. But as New Zealand must be approached by sea from all angles, there is an opportunity to settle this point and this may result in a clearer understanding of how a bird navigates. A number of weather maps for August and September 1952 were, therefore, studied with a view to seeing if either of the above two possibilities were favoured. Unfortunately, however, the wind directions were such (mainly head or following winds) that no firm conclusions can be drawn.

## PAST RECORDS.

A number of records have been received referring to previous years, and though they are not considered in this paper, it seems desirable to place them on record.

**Wellsford** (H. H. Clark).—1938, October 3; 1939, October 4; 1940, September 30; 1941, October 5; 1942, October 7; 1943, October 15; 1944, October 11; 1945, October 26; 1946, September 24; 1947, September 28; 1948, October 1; 1949, September 28; 1950, no record; 1951, October 13; 1952, September 24.

**New Plymouth** (A. B. Norman).—1945, September 28; 1946, September 30; 1947, September 30; 1948, September 24; 1949, September 22; 1950, September 28; 1951, September 23; 1952, September 20.

**Masterton** (Te Whiti) (W. A. Wardell).—1943, October 7; 1946, October 6; 1947, September 30; 1948, October 1; 1949, October 3; 1950, September 24; 1951, September 30; 1952, October 5.

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## SUMMARY.

In 1952 a pilot study was made of the dates of arrival of the shining cuckoo (*Chalcites lucidus*) in New Zealand. An indication of the rigorous methods of ensuring the validity of reports, from persons not known personally to the writer, is given. It is indicated that reports from the same persons for a number of years are desirable. There are several August records, the earliest being August 7, but most reports are towards the end of September.

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**PRIVET BERRIES AS BIRD FOOD.**—Evidence of a native pigeon (*Hemiphaga novaeseelandiae*) eating privet berries has been reported to me by Mr and Mrs J. Gandy, of Howick. They observed the bird on several occasions in June feeding on the berries of a Japanese privet tree in their garden. Both last year and this year silvereyes (*Zosterops lateralis*) have fed busily on privet berries in our garden also.—Noelle Macdonald, Howick,

**CURLEW AT MIRANDA.**—The first curlew (*Numenius madagascariensis*) to be observed at the Firth of Thames for some years were seen feeding on a muddy lagoon near the Miranda limeworks on 6/6/53. The next day the observation was confirmed, when I again visited the area with Mr. H. R. McKenzie. When I first saw the pair they were digging their long, down-curved bills deep into the soft mud, not pausing at all. They appeared very hungry and only when I approached within a couple of hundred feet did they rise together in slow, leisurely flight. They wheeled very slowly in a circle overhead and then alighted again a little further away on the mudflat again. These birds called musically as they flew, unlike the single curlew that Mr. R. B. Sibson and I observed at Karaka on 3/1/53 which called constantly while still on the ground. One bird of the Miranda pair was lighter in colour than the other, but there were no white markings on either bird. When landing, the birds gave several quick twists of their bodies before touching down. Once they flew up with a small party of godwit. Then their larger size was very marked.—Noelle Macdonald, Howick.