

### Waiting for... cuckoos

Waiting for the arrival of a migratory species such as the shining cuckoo is rather like “waiting for Godot”... they are always expected, much discussed, but you don’t quite know when or if they will turn up. The “if” is even more relevant when you are not just waiting for a species but for specific individuals. And when those individuals have been fitted with a back pack before they headed off on their estimated 4700 km solo flights, for us the anticipation is intense... along with the fears that you have compromised their flight, or that the unit has fallen off, or that the unit has failed and the bird has carried it nearly 10,000 km for no good reason. Our aim is to see whether these small (25-30 g) birds fly all the way to and from their “wintering” grounds in the Bismarck Archipelago northeast of New Guinea (or the Solomon Islands, as no one is really sure where ours go) non-stop or make pit stops in Queensland on the way. If they do the whole distance in one flight, it will take the distance record for small land birds from the blackpoll warblers on their trips across the West Atlantic to and from the Caribbean and South America.

That is the situation we are in at the moment, with cuckoos starting to appear on the “radar” of *New Zealand eBird*, but, at the time of writing, none yet south of Nelson. Our birds were tagged near Kaikoura and Le Bons Bay (Banks Peninsula), and so are likely among the late arrivals. After the 16 geolocator tags purchased with a generous grant from the OSNZ Research Fund in 2014 arrived, there was time only to deploy the tiny (1 g) units on three birds in December 2014, before playbacks of love songs had lost their attraction. The other 13 were put to sleep to help save their 2-year batteries and to await the arrival of more birds this Spring. They will shortly be awakened and set out to “zero” their light receptors at known sites before being harnessed to birds. If all goes well, and the birds return, as anticipated, to the same patch of forest or streamside willow they leave in February, and we can find and catch them again to relieve them of the burden, the information they provide will help us understand exactly where and when they go, vital information for a species whose habitats could be under threat at both ends of its migration path. It will be another example of the advances being made on the back of the development of these new technologies, which are truly changing the way we see the natural world.

If all the “ifs” work out, when the cuckoos have returned to the nest in 2016, we will make the results available to both the scientific community and the general public. There is sure to be a lot of interest in what our shining cuckoos can do.