Shining Cuckoo eating an egg

On the late morning of 13 November 1989 near Tikokino, Hawke's Bay, one of us (CM) saw and photographed a Shining Cuckoo (*Chrysococcyx lucidus*) with an egg in its bill (Figure 1). Holding its head up as shown in the photograph, the cuckoo gave a series of convulsive movements involving its whole body, which apparently allowed it to break the egg and swallow the contents. The broken egg-shell fell to the ground. On examination it proved to be white with brownish speckles, and was therefore the egg of a small passerine bird, most species of which in New Zealand have eggs of this colour. The cuckoo's own egg is unspotted olive-green.

There are two possible interpretations of this observation. First, and perhaps more likely, the cuckoo may have been a female and the egg that of a Grey Warbler (*Gerygone igata*) removed from a nest in a previous moment as she parasitised it. The Grey Warbler is the Shining Cuckoo's only successful host in New Zealand (other than on the Chatham Islands) and a host egg is removed when the cuckoo lays (Gill 1982, 1983). November is the peak month of laying by Shining Cuckoos in New Zealand. In Western Australia laying by the same species of cuckoo has been seen (Brooker *et al.* 1988). The female entered the covered nest directly through the entrance to lay, and emerged backwards with a host egg in her bill, which she carried off. The whole process took less than 20 seconds and occurred in the early morning.

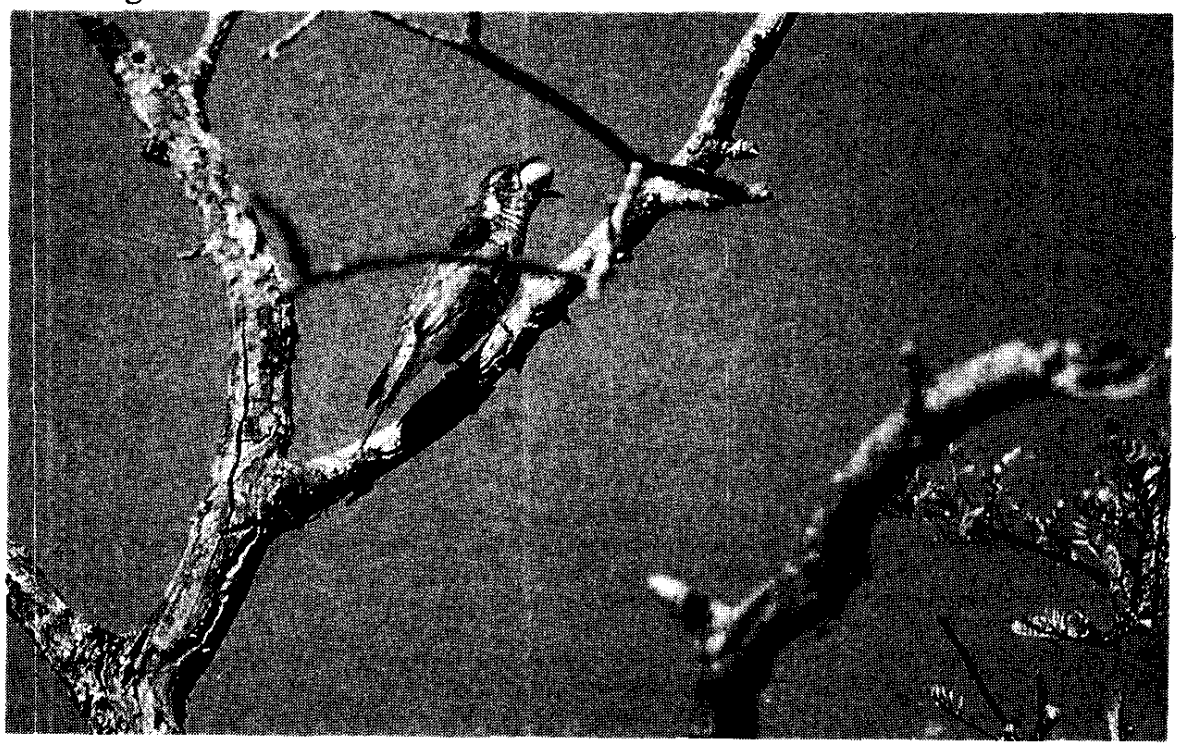

FIGURE 1 — A Shining Cuckoo with the egg of a small passerine in its bill, Tikokino, Hawke's Bay, November 1989

Photo: C. Macdonald

The second possibility is that the cuckoo was of either sex and that the egg was stolen from a nest (Grey Warbler or other species) as an act of predation rather than parasitism. Many species of cuckoo are thought to be general predators of eggs and nestlings. Remains of a small nestling or

embryonic bird have been found in the stomach of a Shining Cuckoo (Gill 1989), suggesting predation unconnected with parasitism.

There have been three previous New Zealand reports of Shining Cuckoos carrying eggs. Michie (1948) on separate occasions saw a Shining Cuckoo eating the contents of a Chaffinch's egg (*Fringilla coelebs*) and Grey Warbler's egg, and then dropping the shell (months of observation not recorded). In November 1985 at about 2 p.m., a Shining Cuckoo was seen carrying a whitish egg (Skinner 1986). There are similar reports from Australia (e.g. Morris & Catchpole 1978).

LITERATURE CITED

BROOKER, M.G.; BROOKER, L.C.; ROWLEY, I. 1988. Egg deposition by the bronze-cuckoos *Chrysococcyx basalis* and *Ch. lucidus*. Emu 88: 107-109.
GILL, B.J. 1982. Notes on the Shining Cuckoo (*Chrysococcyx lucidus*) in New Zealand. Notornis 29: 215-227.
GILL, B.J. 1983. Brood-parasitism by the Shining Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx lucidus* at Kaikoura, New Zealand. Ibis 125: 40-55.
GILL, B.J. 1989. The secret life of the Shining Cuckoo. Forest and Bird 20(3): 34-36.
MICHIE, R.H. 1948. Habits of Shining Cuckoo. NZ Bird Notes 2: 196.
MORRIS, A.K.; CATCHPOLE, B. 1978. Removal of eggs by a Shining Bronze-cuckoo. Emu 78: 234.
SKINNER, J.F. 1986. Shining Cuckoo carrying an egg. Notornis 33: 188.

C. MACDONALD, *Tikokino, R.D. 4, Waipawa;*
B.J. GILL, *Auckland Institute and Museum, Private Bag, Auckland.*

★

REVIEWS

Distribution and Taxonomy of Birds of the World, by C.G. Sibley and B.L. Monroe, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1990. Hardback, 1111pp, price $US125.

This enormous 3 kg book is a systematic list of all living species of birds (plus recent extinctions like the Huia) with a statement on the geographical distribution and habitat of each. Altogether, 9672 species are recognised, 59% of them passerines. A standardised English name is provided for each bird, and these are given, along with generic and specific names, in the very thorough index. Much information on alternative English and scientific names is provided in a codified form by the use of symbols and typefaces. A number up to 5 digits long that has the potential to be used in computer databases is assigned to every species. The numbering system is a complicated one that extends to all species the American Ornithologists' Union numbering system for North American birds that has been in use for a century. A section headed "World Numbers" lists all species in numerical order.

An interesting innovation is to show the superspecies to which a species belongs by inserting a specific name in square brackets between the generic and specific names. Thus Buller's Shearwater, for example, is listed as *Puffinus* [*pacificus*] *bulleri*, which indicates that *bulleri* is a member of the *pacificus* superspecies. This can be a little disconcerting until you become