

SHORT NOTE

The 1962 record of a long-tailed cuckoo (*Eudynamys taitensis*) parasitising a New Zealand fantail (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*)

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The range of species of passerine hosts parasitized by each species of parasitic cuckoo may be wide or narrow (Payne 2005). The long-tailed cuckoo (koekoeā, *Eudynamys taitensis*), which breeds only in New Zealand, principally parasitizes the three species of *Mohoua*, namely whitehead (pōpokotea, *M. albicilla*), yellowhead (mohua, *M. ochrocephala*), and brown creeper (pīpipi, *M. novaeseelandiae*) (Oliver 1955; Gill 2022). These three host species constitute a family (Mohouidae) endemic to New Zealand.

Fledglings of parasitic cuckoos in general, are large (relative to hosts), with large gapes and noisy begging. This can represent a super-stimulus to passing birds of any species (Davies 2000: 80–81). Unconnected birds may divert to feeding the begging cuckoo fledgling if they pass by while carrying food intended for their own offspring. This means that seeing a species feeding a fledgling cuckoo is not evidence that the species was parasitized. However, observing a growing cuckoo nestling in the nest of a species constitutes firm evidence of parasitism.

In a review of evidence for long-tailed cuckoo hosts (Gill 2022), there were only three detailed and



Figure 1. The original printed image of the cuckoo in a New Zealand fantail (piwakawaka, *Rhipidura fuliginosa*) nest, as scanned from the page in *Notornis* (volume 10, page 173; Roberts 1963).

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reliable records of cuckoo nestlings seen in nests of non-mohouid passerines. Evidence for parasitism of the New Zealand fantail or pīwakawaka (*Rhipidura fuliginosa*) rests on a stand-alone photograph, and accompanying caption, published in *Notornis* in 1963 (Roberts 1963; scanned from the printed page and reproduced here as Fig. 1).

The *Notornis* photograph, attributed to P.M. Roberts, has the following caption:

“Young Long-tailed Cuckoo (*Eudynamis* [sic] *taitensis*) in nest of Fantail (*R. fuliginosa*), placed at about 5½ft. [1.7 m] in a pigeonwood [*Hedycarya arborea*] at Pye’s Pa Bush, near Tauranga. Is this combination unique?”

The photograph shows a fantail advancing towards the open gape of a long-tailed cuckoo nestling in what is clearly a typical fantail nest. The neat rounded rim raised above the supporting twigs, and the “tail” below are characteristic of fantail nests (Heather & Robertson 1996). The cuckoo nestling is well-feathered, at least two-thirds of the way through its nestling period, and has the pale dorsal spots characteristic of an immature long-tailed cuckoo. The cuckoo fills the nest and appears to be the sole occupant. The image was in the issue of *Notornis* published in March 1963, so the photograph was presumably taken in summer (December to February) of 1962–1963, the months when long-tailed cuckoos would be at the nestling stage (see Gill & Hauber 2013).

Philip Murray Roberts (1922–2015) was Works Manager at the Bay of Plenty Farmers Fertiliser Co-Op. His wife Patricia Ruth Roberts (née Monckton; 1922–2016) was an OSNZ member. Both Philip and Ruth were keen photographers. Ruth had a Leica camera with a telephoto lens. Philip used an enlarger and developed his own black and white photographs.

In April 2021, Elizabeth Simm, daughter of Mr and Mrs Roberts, presented to Tauranga City Libraries two of her parents’ photographic prints (Fig. 2; see blog by PC on the Tauranga City Libraries website, “The cuckoo of Pye’s Pa bush”, published 10 May 2021). The additional photographs (monochrome prints measuring 212 x 165 mm) are different from the *Notornis* photograph but show activity at the same nest. All three images were taken from the same, or similar, camera angle, and each shows a slightly different moment as a fantail delivers food to the cuckoo while perched on a twig adjacent to the nest. Figure 2 (upper) seems to show a small, rounded food item in the fantail’s beak.

Mrs Roberts must have sent a photograph of the nest to the ornithologist R.A. Falla. In a letter

to her dated 21 December 1962 (held by Rosemary Sargison, another daughter of Mrs Roberts), Falla commented on the importance of the observation. This dates the photographs to late 1962.

The image published in 1963 now seems a little crude by today’s standard of photographic reproduction. The purpose of this note is to reproduce the two additional images to give clearer photographic evidence of this unique record of brood-parasitism.

It remains to be seen whether parasitism of fantails by long-tailed cuckoos is observed again. Such a finding would warrant close observation to see if fantails are capable of raising the chick to fledging, and of caring for the fledgling to independence. The exact location of the nest depicted in the photographs is not known, but it may have been on land, now cleared of bush, south-west of the Pye’s Pa School (which is at 37.819°S, 176.126°E). Bird-watchers in the Tauranga area should pay special attention to fantail nests in case a lineage (host-specific race or gens) of fantail-parasitising long-tailed cuckoos is active in the area.

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Figure 2. Scans of two additional photographic prints of the New Zealand fantail (pīwakawaka, *Rhipidura fuliginosa*) nest identified by Roberts (1963). In the upper image the fantail seems to hold a small food item in its bill. Photo 21-273 (above) and 21-274 (below); Tauranga City Libraries.