A recent specimen of a Long-tailed Cuckoo from Lord Howe Island

Walter E. Boles, Leah Tsang and Jaynia Sladek*

Bird Section, Australian Museum, 6 College Street, Sydney NSW 2010, Australia
*Corresponding author. Email: walter.boles@austmus.gov.au

Summary. An adult female Long-tailed Cuckoo *Urodynamis taitensis* (also known as *Eudynamys taitensis*), killed by hitting a window on Lord Howe Island on 2 December 2010, constitutes the the sixth record and only the third specimen from the Island and the only individual for which the sex is known.

Introduction

The Long-tailed Cuckoo *Urodynamis taitensis* (also known as *Eudynamys taitensis*) breeds only in New Zealand, but on its migration moves northward to islands through the Pacific in an 11 000-km-wide east–west arc (Bogert 1937; Gill & Hauber 2012, 2013). There are no accepted records of this species from mainland Australia, but it is an irregular and apparently declining passage migrant to Norfolk Island (Schodde *et al.* 1983; Mason 1997) and a rare visitor to Lord Howe Island. Although sight records from Lord Howe Island are rare, specimens are even more so: of the five records given by McAllan *et al.* (2004), only two are of specimens, and these were taken in 1892 and 1905. The last reported observation was in 1989. Described here is a recent specimen from the Island.

Results

On 2 December 2010, a Long-tailed Cuckoo was killed by striking a window on Muttonbird Drive, Lord Howe Island. Courtney Turner and Maddy Giles passed it to Hank Bower (Manager Environment/World Heritage, Lord Howe Island Board), who in turn contacted the Australian Museum and arranged for the body to be sent to that institution. The specimen has been prepared as a study skin, with the Australian Museum registration number O.72639 (Figure 1).

The Long-tailed Cuckoo was a female, with the ovary 9 × 4 mm and somewhat smooth, and the oviduct narrow and only slightly curled. Measurements of the specimen were: mass 160 g, total length 417 mm, wingspan 545 mm, wing 191 mm, tail 236 mm, culmen (to insertion into skull) 35.5 mm, tarsus 36.8 mm, total head length 61.0 mm. Soft-part colours were: iris (sunken) reddish brown, bill mid grey with a rose flush to the ventral surface of lower mandible, tarsus light grey. The bird had heavy abdominal fat. Pectoral muscle tissue was sampled and retained in the Museum's frozen tissue collection (EBU 59757). There was no active moult, and the plumage was relatively fresh, with minimal abrasion to the feathers.

Figure 1. Long-tailed Cuckoo *Urodynamis taitensis*, Australian Museum O.72639, from Lord Howe Island, 2 December 2010. Dorsal and ventral views. Photos: Walter E. Boles

By the criteria given by Gill & Hauber (2013)—back and scapulars with reddish-brown transverse bars and underparts white with dark longitudinal streaks—the bird was in adult plumage.

Discussion

After the breeding season in New Zealand, Long-tailed Cuckoos undertake a northwards migration into the Pacific up to 6000 km from their breeding grounds. Gill & Hauber (2012, 2013) deduced the following sequence of migration from an examination of specimen and observational records. This species is commonly recorded in New Zealand in October–February. The population begins to decline in March–April, while at the same time numbers (which are lowest in the islands in October–February) start to rise. By May, Cuckoos are rare in New Zealand and effectively absent from June until August. During this period, they are common in the Pacific islands. They start to decline in the Pacific and increase in New Zealand in September. While in the northern sector of their range, juveniles undergo their post-juvenile moult and are thus in adult plumage when they return to New Zealand.

The specimen described here was in adult plumage and the relative freshness of the plumage implies that this bird had undergone moult not long before its death, consistent with this sequence. The condition of the oviduct and ovary indicates that it was a young female that had not yet bred. This is what would be expected of an individual that was returning to New Zealand on its first migration. Previous occurrences on Lord Howe Island (when noted) were January–February and 'spring' (McAllan *et al.* 2004). The December date was within the range of adult birds on return migration through other mid-latitude locations (Norfolk Island, Kermadec Islands) (Gill & Hauber 2012, 2013). It also means that the bird would

have arrived in New Zealand after breeding of its host species was well under way and clutches too far advanced to parasitise (see Higgins 1999). As some of these host species are double-brooded, however, the Cuckoo could exploit second clutches. It is also possible that not all females breed in their first season in adult plumage.

The specimen comprises the sixth record and only the third specimen of the Long-tailed Cuckoo from Lord Howe Island. All three specimens were adults, but the current record is the only one for which the sex of the bird is known. This report was submitted to, and accepted by, the BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC) (Submission 807: BARC 2014).

It is likely that the Long-tailed Cuckoo reaches Lord Howe Island more often than records indicate; however, its skulking behaviour, the probable short duration of its stay, and the small number of observers who could recognise this species would all contribute to the paucity of reports. Acquisition of future specimens will be reliant on accidental deaths, like the current record.

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