

CUCKOOS AND THEIR EGGS

By J. NEIL McGILP.

Ever since Aelian, a Latin scholar in the second century, first mentioned the fact that Cuckoos laid their eggs in other birds' nests, many reasons have been suggested to account for some peculiarity in their habits. It is, particularly with the Cuckoo family, rather easy to make statements but extremely difficult to prove or disprove them, simply because the history of the habits of the Cuckoo has by no means been fully written. Its habits during the laying season are so intriguing, fascinating and elusive that it is most difficult to arrive at the reason for such and such action. Nevertheless, some "shots in the dark" are ventured in the hope that they may be right or be very difficult to affirm or deny, no matter how reasonable the random shot may appear.

In the Proc. Roy. Soc. Med., Sept., 1944, Dr. E. S. Stern said that in regard to Dr. C. S. Myers' paper, the cuckoo laid her egg in the type of nest in which she was reared, and presumably, if the egg was laid in the nest of another variety of bird, a change of habit

would occur in the offspring of this latter variety.'

This statement is rather ambiguous in that in one place "the type of nest" is used, whilst further on "in the nest of another variety of bird" appears.

It is well known that the nests selected by the Cuckoo, desiring to deposit its egg, are either open cup or saucer-shaped nests or the covered or domed-shaped nests. The Pallid Cuckoo almost invariably chooses the cup or saucer-shaped nest and any departure from this practice may be due to the fact that an open nest is not available in a case of urgency—but this is purely surmise.

On the other hand the Fantailed Cuckoo and the Black-eared Cuckoo show a decided preference to domed-covered nests, though it may be that, when occasion demands it, they are forced to lay their eggs in open nests. With the two small Bronze Cuckoos, however, one nest is as good as the other—that is to say, they appear to care not whether the nest is an open one or one which is domed.

It would no doubt be possible to refer to the open nest as one type and the domed structure as the second type, and if this could be substantiated Dr. Stern's statement would possibly prove generally correct.

Anyone who has given some study to the structure of birds' nests will at once disagree with such a classification and point out that it is erroneous to place the nest of the Wattle Bird in the same class or type as the tiny cup-shaped nest of the Silvereye or the smaller Honeyeaters, or the large bulky nest of the Babbler in the same category as the dainty nests of the Tree Tits or the Gerygones.

A student of nidification of Australian birds could by closely observing its size, shape, the materials used, its situation and its basal support, fairly definitely identify the builder of the nest. In short, almost every species of bird builds a different type of nest. This must have been known to Drs. Stern and Myers, and it is inconceivable that they intended the words "type of nest" to indicate solely an open or a covered or closed nest; rather would they intend readers to understand that this term and "in the nest of another type of bird" were one and the same.

The suggestion that the Cuckoo lays its egg in the nest of the type or species of bird

in which she herself was reared, that is to say, that a female Pallid Cuckoo which was reared in the nest of a Wattlebird would lay her egg in a Wattlebird's nest, is not at all new. Charles Darwin, in the "Origin of Species," was possibly the first to make such an assertion and it has been repeated, in more or less detail, many times.

There is little evidence that Cuckoos pay any particular attention to any one species of bird, which should be the case if the assertion that they lay their eggs in nests of the species which fostered their arrival.

It is well known that different species of birds nest at various times and that this period usually corresponds with climatic conditions. Cuckoos, so far as is known, would not have an extensive laying season, although they probably have two laying seasons in the year when conditions are suitable in the North in the early months of the year. Would it not be reasonable to suppose that the Cuckoos use the nests of birds already breeding when they themselves are ready to lay?

The writer recalls watching a Narrow-billed Bronze Cuckoo in a paddock near Aldgate, Mt. Lofty Ranges, for several days, during which time only the one Cuckoo was observed or heard. It was first noticed flying on to a small teatree bush and then on to a prickly acacia. It did this several times and as on examination of the bushes it was found that a pair of Yellow-rumped Thornbills were putting the finishing touch to their nest, whilst in the acacia a Yellow-winged Honeyeater's nest was ready for eggs, it was decided to haunt the locality in the hope of securing evidence on the actual laying of the Cuckoo's egg. The next day the Honeyeater's nest contained an egg of the Cuckoo, and as the Cuckoo still occasionally flew to the teatree further watch was continued, but again the bird beat the watcher, for two days after the first egg had been found a second one, almost identical in shape and in marking, appeared, with one white egg, in the nest of the Thornbill.

It would be possible that another Narrow-billed Bronze Cuckoo had visited the paddock and laid the egg during the watcher's enforced absence, but there is little doubt that it was the one bird which laid the two eggs. Circumstantial evidence, admittedly.

Was the Narrow-billed Bronze Cuckoo reared in the Honeyeater or the Thornbill type

of nest? If the former, why did it not lay its egg in one of several other Yellow-winged Honeyeaters' nests. Another Thorn-bill's nest was not observed in the paddock. The point is that evidently the Cuckoo did not greatly care which nest was used, both being ready for eggs.

One would perhaps be justified in asking why do Cuckoos lay, as they surely do, their eggs in the nests of such introduced birds as the Sparrow, the Blackbird and the Goldfinch, or why they lay in nests of Red-browed, Spotted-sided and Chestnut-eared Finches, birds which are grain feeders and consequently not able, so far as observations go, to rear young Cuckoos, which require insectivorous food? This laying of Cuckoo eggs in Finches' nests is not accidental, for in one season many such occurrences were reported in Victoria by the late Tom Tregallis and others. Could this not be accounted for through the absence, at the time, of other nests?

Then again the Black-eared Cuckoo lays in the nest of the Red-throat in our dry inland areas, and when they are in the higher rainfall districts, where the Red-throat does not occur, they use the nest of the *Sericornis*. Is it conceivable that the northern-bred bird only lays in the Red-throat's nest and does not lay when it visits the south, the reverse applying to the bird bred in the *Sericornis*' nest.

The writer is of opinion that Cuckoos use the nests of birds nesting when they themselves are ready to lay their eggs, preference being given by some of them to open cup nests and by others to closed nests.

It may be wise to state that in writing that "the Cuckoo lays its egg in a nest" it does not indicate that the writer is of the opinion that the egg is actually laid in the nest and not put there after it has been laid elsewhere. He has no personal evidence to prove either method and will not "shoot in the dark."