

SOME OBSERVATIONS OF A PALLID CUCKOO'S EARLY LIFE

by A. HARDY and J. HARDY

This is an account of a family's observations of a young Pallid Cuckoo. *Cuculus pallidus* made during the first six weeks after it left the nest in a suburban garden in Salisbury, north of Adelaide, South Australia. The nest of its initial foster-parents, White-plumed Honeyeaters *Meliphaga penicillata* was first looked for and located about October 19, 1970, because of the very noisy occupant. The nest was about ten feet above the ground in the outer canopy of an *Acacia longifolia*. At this time the young bird was not visible and we were unaware that it was a young cuckoo, though later a member of the family recalled having seen dead nestlings on the ground beneath the tree.

The young cuckoo, close to adult size, was first seen on the morning of October 27 clinging tightly to the nest in a boisterous wind. Between 1600-1700 hr. it left the nest and perched about six feet away from it. It spent the next day in a *Homolanthus* tree about thirty feet away and the succeeding day in a eucalypt about ninety feet from the nest. On following days it moved about the garden more and more and flew away when approached. During this time it was fed assiduously by the honeyeaters but by November 9 and 10 it was noticed that the honeyeaters were feeding it much less frequently. On November 12 it was located, beside a Blackbird's nest containing four well grown young. The nest was about six feet up in a *Laurestinus* bush. The cuckoo gaped widely, called loudly and rapidly and shook its wings frantically whenever the parents approached. Later in the day both parents were observed feeding the cuckoo in a large cypress which overhangs the *Laurestinus*. It is likely that the cuckoo was also fed at the nest site though observations were difficult due to the shyness of the Blackbirds.

Next morning one young Blackbird had already left the nest by 0730 hrs. and the others were very restless. The cuckoo was again perched beside the nest. By 1030 hrs. all the young and the cuckoo had left the nest. The male Blackbird was seen several

times during the day feeding the cuckoo, which kept within thirty-five feet or so of the nest. The male continued to feed it frequently and energetically from early morning till dark until November 18. During all this time it remained in a very circumscribed area not far from the Blackbird's nest, usually quite conspicuous on an open branch.

On the morning of November 20 the cuckoo was sitting in a new place, another White-plumed Honeyeater's nest, about twenty feet up in the cypress. The honeyeaters were attacking it vigorously, the cuckoo meanwhile begging energetically without avail and sometimes attempting to sit on the nest. Later in the day the Blackbird was seen feeding it once. The cuckoo spent some time lurking around our aviary, sitting on the wire or on the ground beside it.

For the next three days it was very noisy and plaintive and we did not see it being fed at all; it lurked about the honeyeater's nest and was consistently attacked. Then on the 24th there was a sudden change in its behaviour. It was discovered sitting rather quietly, half hidden in a very dense and inaccessible part of the cypress, about fifteen feet above ground level. A pair of Greenfinches were visiting it incessantly though secretly. They flew usually into the dense growth and stayed out of sight, but on one occasion actual feeding was witnessed. We assumed that the Greenfinches had a nest hidden in the thick growth but could not detect it. For two days the cuckoo was not seen to move from this position. On the 27th it was flying about rather more but always in the same tree or close by, and often returning to the same half-hidden spot. The following day it was flying about the garden again, calling plaintively and monotonously, apparently without avail. On the 29th it had gone back to the honeyeater's nest in the cypress. Their behaviour towards it had altered most markedly. They visited it frequently but did not attack as before. The cuckoo stayed by this nest most of the day though it was once seen drinking from a birdbath at the other side of the garden.

This was the first time we had seen it drink. Its begging calls were heard frequently, and the next day the honeyeaters were actually seen feeding it. The next three days were hot. The cuckoo was again seen drinking and many begging calls were heard. No observations were made on December 4-5. On the 6th in the morning a honeyeater was seen going to and from the cuckoo at the far side of the garden and busily feeding it. This was the last sighting, though we thought we could hear it in the trees along the Little Para Creek some two hundred yards away across open ground.

COMMENT

Pallid cuckoos are usually heard quite commonly here for a few weeks in the early spring, generally calling from the River Red-Gums along the creek, and a couple had been seen pair-feeding earlier in the season of 1971. The garden is nearly an acre of irregular shape, full of trees and shrubs, and is almost surrounded by open ground and a road, which may be why the young cuckoo remained in this limited area. The nests it parasitised were all within fifty feet of the house and its loud voice made it easy to

locate. Owing to this favourable set of circumstances it was possible to keep the bird under close and frequent observation for six weeks. It became accustomed to people—many of the neighbourhood watched it being fed—and could be approached quite closely, though its hosts were much shyer. It is perhaps worth noting that on December 5, the day before it left us, a large number of people came to a wedding in the garden, which may have prompted it to go further afield.

I have never read or heard of young cuckoos persistently and deliberately haunting the vicinity of nests with nestlings in them as this bird did, although it is well known that passing birds will casually feed a demanding young cuckoo. Of *Cuculus canonus*, the English cuckoo, it is noted that “apparently the voice of the young cuckoo has commanding, almost hypnotic power, for birds other than those which have cherished it as a nestling will feed it . . . the alarm cries of the foster parents have no effect in silencing its continuous demands.” (*The Birds of the British Isles*, Part 1.) That description could well be applied in the present case.