

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher, Jim Butler

Contact Jim at: beautifulbirds@y7mail.com



The Two Big Summer Cuckoos

The two big summer migrant cuckoos from New Guinea and Indonesia, the Channel-billed Cuckoo and the Eastern Koel, have arrived to breed. Their constant loud calls, day and night, are a summer feature throughout the suburbs. I listen for their arrival: I heard the first Koel on 13 September and the first Channel-billed Cuckoo on 24 September.

They are both brood parasites, so they don't raise their own young. They rely on other bird species to do that! While the adults are waiting for their young to be raised they create a lot of noise and suffer very hostile aggression from other species protecting their nests! When the breeding cycle is over, the adults and young cuckoos return north.

The Channel-billed Cuckoo (l = 60cm) is the largest parasitic cuckoo in the world and deposits its eggs in the nests of Torresian Crows (l = 50cm) and Pied Currawongs (l = 45cm). Once the cuckoo egg has hatched these smaller host birds

have to work frantically to supply enough food for the developing young cuckoo chick. This cuckoo chick does not force the host chicks or eggs out of the nest so the host parents get a large extra mouth to feed which so dominates the food supplied that the host chicks usually die.

The smaller Eastern Koel adults (l = 43cm) use Mudlarks (l = 28cm) and Noisy Friarbirds (l = 32cm) to raise their young chick, which removes any host eggs and chicks from the nest as soon as it hatches. The host Mudlarks or Friarbirds then spend their time feeding this Koel chick which is quickly larger than they are. The parent Koels stay in the vicinity of the nest where their egg was deposited. They are easily heard and they are common, so look for this weird lifecycle in action.

Happy Birding!

– Jim

Image: Channel-Billed Cuckoo -
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