

« BIRD IN THE HAND »

H. J. de S. Disney, The Australian Museum; drawings by W. T. Cooper

Pallid Cuckoo *Cuculus pallidus*

Ageing and Sexing

It must be remembered that these articles are guides and that some birds may not readily be put into a definite category.

The Pallid Cuckoo passes through five recognisable plumages—Juvenile, First-year Immature, Second-year Immature, Third-year Sub-adult and Fourth-year Adult. A white nape spot is present in all plumages. The female may breed in first-year plumage.

JUVENILE (and nestling or fledgling)

The whole plumage generally is soft and 'loose' textured with dark blackish-brown feathers with wide white ends and margins. The overall effect is a white and blackish-streaked bird. Sometimes the white areas have a slight buff wash which is lost by wear. (For illustrations, see Frith 1969, p. 244; 1976, p. 492).

Upperparts

Forehead: Black to dark brown.

Crown: Black to dark brown, some feathers with broad white edges giving a streaked appearance.

Neck: Similar to crown, but with more white.

Mantle: Similar to crown, but often less white.

Rump: White with long narrow dark centre shaft streaks.

Uppertail coverts: Dark blackish to brown with broad 'loose' textured white edges to feathers.

Underparts

Chin: Blackish to dark brown with slight whiteness from edges of the feathers.

Throat: Similar to chin, sometimes white, making a slight streaking.

Breast: Upper, similar to throat; lower, streaked similar to belly.

Belly: Streaked; blackish to dark brown and white.

Wing

Primaries: Well-marked white tips; narrow white outside edges with small white or buff-tipped indentations along edges, sometimes lost by wear.

Secondaries: Outer feathers with well-marked white edges to tips and sides, and with white indentations. Inner feathers more pointed and with more white on edges and well-marked white 'triangular' spots.

Primary coverts: White tips on each side of pointed brown ends.

Lesser coverts: Dark blackish to brown with pointed centres and broad white tips; blackish on shoulder forming a dark patch.

Median coverts: White surrounding black or blackish-brown wedge-shaped centres, darker near shoulders.

Scapulars: Blackish to dark brown with broad white edges; often one side of shaft black and other side white. The large bottom scapular dark grey or blackish, becoming brown without white edges.

NOTE: Juvenile body feathers are quickly moulted and birds with part juvenile and part first-year (immature) plumage occur. Sometimes birds may moult directly from juvenile plumage to the full grey adult plumage, but usually some unmoulted juvenile secondaries remain.

FIRST YEAR IMMATURE

The body feathers of this plumage are still rather 'loose'-textured and appear shorter and broader than those of the next plumage. It is distinguished from the second-year immature plumage, which also has mottled upperparts, by the buff and brown bars right across the breast.

Upperparts

Forehead: Brown.

Crown: Mainly brown or mixed with light buffish streaks.

Neck: Light buff and brown streaks.

Mantle: Brown with light buff tips forming spots or slight bars.

Rump: Grey to greyish-brown, sometimes with slight buff.

Uppertail coverts: Grey outer feathers with white 'triangular' spots along edges.

Scapulars: Grey with deep buff marks on edges, reduced or lost with wear.

Underparts

Chin: Whitish to creamy buff.

Throat: Pale buff and brown, giving effect of brown and buff barring.

Breast: Similar to throat, extending to the flank.

Belly: Whitish-grey with or without faint brown barring.

Wing

Primaries: No white tips; outer—slight buff outer webs and well-marked buff spots; inner—well-marked buff outer webs and tips. The buff may become whitish or lost with wear.

Secondaries: With large 'triangular' buff spots. Outer feathers square ended with slight buff edges; buff may become whitish or lost with wear.

Primary coverts: Tips usually buff, occasionally whitish, soon lost by wear.

Lesser coverts: Brown with buff tips.

Median coverts: Brown with large buff tips and marginal 'triangular' spots.

Scapulars: Brown with large buff marginal 'triangular' spots.

SECOND YEAR IMMATURE

Distinguished from the first-year immature by 'tight' textured plumage with much deeper buff, almost orange on the back. Underparts all grey, except for orange-buff and brown on sides of breast near shoulders. (See Slater 1970, Fig. 6, p. 117).

Upperparts

Forehead: Grey.

Crown: Striped dark brown and deep buff.

Neck: Deep buff with brown streaks.

Mantle: Dark brown with deep rufous-buff spots or slight bars.

Rump: Grey.

Uppertail coverts: Grey, outer edge, with white marginal 'triangular' spots.

Underparts

Chin: Pale grey.

Throat: Pale grey similar to chin.

Breast: Similar to throat, with bright rufous and dark brown markings at sides near 'shoulders'.

Belly: Pale grey.



JUVENILE



FIRST YEAR IMMATURE



SECOND YEAR IMMATURE



SUB-ADULT



ADULT

Wing

Primaries: Similar to those of first-year immature. When fresh, grey with greenish sheen, wearing to brown. Buff marginal 'triangular' spots a deeper colour, but wearing to whitish.

Secondaries: Similar to those of first-year immature, but deeper buff marks becoming whitish with wear.

Primary coverts: Similar to those of first-year immature; brown with squarish ends (except outer two).

Lesser coverts: Similar to those of first-year immature; deep buff marks wearing to whitish.

Median coverts: Similar to those of first-year immature; dark brown with deep buff marks wearing to whitish.

Scapulars: Grey, becoming brown with wear, with slight or well-marked buff marginal 'triangular' spots.

THIRD YEAR SUB-ADULT

Upperparts

Forehead, Crown: Grey, becoming brown with wear.

Neck: Grey, becoming brown with wear; deep buff marks below white nape spot, sometimes forming streaks.

Mantle, Rump, Uppertail Coverts: Grey, becoming brown with wear.

Underparts

Chin, Throat, Breast, Belly: Uniform pale grey.

Wing

Primaries: Outer primaries with slight traces of deep buff on outer webs, quickly wearing to whitish or lost. Inner primaries with small narrow deep buff marks on outer webs, soon wearing to whitish or lost, except towards base of feathers.

Secondaries: Similar to primaries, with small to large buff marginal 'triangular' spots on outer webs wearing to whitish.

Primary coverts: Blackish, wearing to brown with square ends (except outer two).

Lesser coverts: Grey; similar to back, becoming brown with wear; faint whitish tips to feathers.

Median coverts: Similar to lesser coverts, with small buff marginal 'triangular' spots wearing to whitish.

Scapulars: Similar to lesser coverts, with no buff markings.

FOURTH YEAR PLUMAGE—ADULTS

Upperparts

Forehead, Crown, Neck, Mantle, Rump, Uppertail coverts: Uniform dark grey, becoming brown with wear.

Underparts

Chin, Throat, Breast, Belly: Uniform pale grey.

Wing

Primaries: Very faint markings, wearing to whitish and soon worn off.

Secondaries: No marginal spots; faint buff edges wearing to whitish.

Primary coverts: Dark with square ends.

Lesser and Median coverts: No buff edges, sometimes whitish at tips.

Scapulars: Like upperparts; no buff.

Sexing

Adult birds of both sexes are considered to have similar grey plumages. Birds with mottled brown backs have been thought to be always females; however, a few mottled-backed specimens have been found labelled as males and further research is needed.

NOTE: Although the five plumages given above are achieved by four moults, often a plumage may be mixed with unmoulted feathers of an earlier plumage, even when breeding. A discussion on the plumage changes and moult of the Pallid Cuckoo will be published later.

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