

Courtship Feeding and Mating in the Channel-billed Cuckoo

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Noske (1978) summarised some records of courtship feeding in Australian cuckoos; his list included five species (Pallid Cuckoo *Cuculus pallidus*, Brush Cuckoo *C. variolosus*, Fan-tailed Cuckoo *C. pyrrhophanus*, Horsefield's Bronze-Cuckoo *Chrysococcyx basalis* and Shining Bronze-Cuckoo *C. lucidus*). On 25 October 1982, at the edge of the Beaury State Forest approximately 15 km west of Urbenville, N.S.W., I observed courtship feeding and mating in Channel-billed Cuckoos *Scythrops novae-hollandiae*.

I was first attracted to the birds by the quiet, reedy trumpeting sounds being made by the female, both were perched about 12 m above the ground in a eucalypt in a wooded gully. The male was carrying a stick insect in his bill, he gradually approached the calling female who then squatted low on the branch and spread her wings. The male immediately mounted, but over-balanced four seconds later when the female reached up and took the food offering from his bill. She swallowed the insect at once. The birds then separated by 50 m or so; the female continued to call and watched the male, who remained silent except for some low guttural calls, which were made by both birds when moving. Half an hour later the male caught another stick insect, the female quickly moved over to him and the same performance was repeated. After a further half hour the male caught a third stick insect and once again presented it to the female and mounted her. This time, however, he held on to the insect when she tried to take it from him, so that she won only a small part of it. She then spent about 30 seconds perched beside him trying to snatch the rest of the insect from him. The male may have been waiting for her to adopt a mating posture again, but when she did not do so he swallowed the insect. When I lost sight of the birds about five minutes later the female was still calling, as she had been doing for almost the whole time I had been watching the pair.

These observations indicate that the capture and presentation of a large food item by the male is a prerequisite for mating in Channel-billed Cuckoos. They also carry the rather intriguing suggestion that the male may sometimes be able to cheat. In this context it is interesting to compare my observations with another record of courtship feeding in channel-bills, (I. Watson, 2 November, 1950; quoted by Hindwood and McGill 1951). In this case one bird presented a spray of eucalypt or mistletoe leaves, which it had softened by mastication. The second bird took the leaves, after a lot of tugging and pulling, and swallowed them. Although the female(?) was by this time flattened on the branch with her wings drooping, the two then separated without mating. Perhaps this observation was of a male trying to court a female with a false offering?

References

- Hindwood, K. A. and A. R. McGill (1951), 'The 'Derra Derra' 1950 Camp-out of the R.A.O.U.', *Emu* 50: 217-238.
- Noske, R. (1978), 'Courtship feeding in cuckoos: a summary', N.S.W. Field Ornithologists Club Newsletter, Issue No. 33.

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