Chestnut-winged Cuckoo *Clamator coromandus* on Home Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, 3rd December 2018 to 18th February 2019

A new bird for Australia and its Territories

Submission to BirdLife Australia Rarities Committee (BARC) Case #1065

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Introduction

We submit for endorsement by BARC a record of a Chestnut-winged Cuckoo *Clamator coromandus* that was present on Home Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands (12º07'S 96º54'E) from 3rd December 2018 to 18th February 2019 as the first for Australia. The Cocos (Keeling) Islands are an Australian External Territory situated in the north-eastern Indian Ocean.

Chestnut-winged Cuckoo, Cocos, 3rd December 2018 Photo by Robert Shore

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These three sequential images of this first fly-by shown above convey something of the way this bird had the propensity to disappear rapidly

Chestnut-winged Cuckoo, Cocos, 3rd December 2018 Photos by Robert Shore
This is the original shot from which the enlargement at top of page 2 above was cropped. This tree is an introduced casuarina or allocasuarina

The Observations, Habitat and its Behaviour

This Cuckoo was first seen by birders when members of a visiting Birding Tours Australia group saw it in the grounds of Oceania House during a visit to Home Island on 3rd December 2018. Locals claim to have seen it for up to six weeks prior to that. Thereafter it was glimpsed intermittently for another ten weeks, the last report being on 18th February. Apart from the authors, those known or believed to have seen it include Richard Baxter (tour leader), John Kyngdon (possibly first to see it, James Mustafa (first to alert others), Darryl Eggins, Jim Sneddon, Glen Pacey, Rhonda Barrand, Sue Abbotts, Neil Thompson, Sue Taylor, Tania Ireton, Damian Baxter, Alwyn Simple, Barb Williams, Bill Moorhead & Jack Moorhead. We apologise to others some known only by their first name omitted from this list. Cocos resident birders, at least over the summer period, Geof Christie and Pamela Jones whose home is about 80 minutes away on West Island (including a 40 minute ferry ride), also saw it and their experience is testimony to the problems that seeing this bird presented. They report they needed eight attempts.

The grounds of Oceania House are somewhat overgrown and consist largely of grassy areas with about 50% tree cover, varying from massive, very mature, indigenous species such as *Callophyllum inophyllum* to cultivated fruit and shade trees some little more than saplings and a couple of clumps of bamboo.

This bird had a slothful demeanour remaining inactive for long periods. When perched, its furtive behaviour ensured that it was always secreted in foliage and nigh impossible to see. Moreover it was

difficult to flush preferring to remain hidden rather than bursting from cover. In order to see the bird the best strategy was to wait quietly in an open area with a good view of the sky and wait for it to fly over. Despite a proliferation of cameras at the site, we know of only one photographer, co-author Robert Shore, who managed to get useful shots – those reproduced here. Mostly it sought cover in the canopy of large trees but on one occasion in January 2019 it was flushed by Damian Baxter and two companions from low shrubs bordering the circuit track near the sports ground. Barb Williams (who saw it well) and Jenny Spry (who didn't) flushed it from the area near the chicken coops on 8th January 2019. By way of illustration we give below accounts of two fairly typical observations.

The observers in the first of these were Richard Baxter, Damian Baxter, Bill Moorhead and Jack Moorhead at Oceania House over the Christmas – New Year holiday period. They quietly entered via a side gate and stealthily approached a suitable viewing spot secreting themselves in the shadows of the garden wall and overhanging trees. Over a ten minute period, Richard played calls of the Chestnut-winged Cuckoo periodically. They heard a reply once from trees in the adjacent park and waited for a fly-over that never came. However, on three occasions they saw an unknown large dark bird drop to the ground near a fallen tree and return very quickly and almost vertically into the canopy. The bird was partially obscured and they could see no colour. Bill and Damian moved to a new position with a better line of sight. The bird again flew down but this time landed on the stump of the fallen tree where the top half of the bird was visible but in the shade. It was obviously the Cuckoo which quickly returned once more into the canopy. Richard Baxter had fired off a quick shot but the resulting image is too poor to use herein. Richard then walked under the bird flushing it out enabling the others to view it in flight.

Mike Carter saw this bird on 18th February 2019 and was the last to see it. He was sitting in the Oceania House garden where Geof Christie had sat him down then walked around the garden in an attempt to flush our quarry. When Mike saw it, the Cuckoo was in flight and losing height having just passed over a 3 m high section of an internal garden wall. It remained partially in view for about another 20-30 m before disappearing out of sight behind trees and buildings not to be seen again. It was only partially in view because it was variously obscured by foliage and branches. It was judged to be similar in size to Asian Koel which had been observed previously here on several occasions. It also resembled a male Koel in being blackish in colour and had a long tail but it was much slimmer, the tail was relatively narrow and it had a white patch on the breast. No white collar or any reddish tones were seen. Moreover it did not fly particularly fast as he had been led to expect from the text in Coates & Bishop (1997), which describes the flight of this species as 'swift and direct'. Whilst the flight was not unduly ponderous, and was certainly direct it was not 'swift', an adjective that I would use to describe the flight of a Lorikeet. Moreover, Erritzoe, *et al.* (2012) (page 62), also says 'flight swift and direct' and adds 'with rapid wing beats'. I thought its flight reminiscent of a corvid with rather purposeful wing beats. Therefore I began to doubt that I had seen the target bird. However the statement in Brazil (2009), 'Flight rather slow and heavy like coucal', allayed my concerns. Later Glen Pacey said he didn't think its flight was 'fast' and revealed that he too had not seen a white collar on the hind neck nor the rufous in the wings. If the authors of our text books don't agree, on field characters, then it is difficult for observers in the field and BARC to arrive at satisfactory conclusions.

The Bird

It was similar in length to a Koel but had a slim body with a long but less voluminous tail. Shape and plumage is adequately shown in the accompanying photos and as no field notes were taken, the brief description below was compiled mostly by viewing the photos. It had a small dark bill, wholly black upper parts including crown and tail, a short crest and chestnut wings. The underparts were dark with pale areas on the breast and underwing coverts.

Identification

Given that this is a very distinctive, unmistakable species, identification is indisputable (Wells 1999; Payne 2005; Robson 2008; Brazil 2009; Erritzoe *et al*. 2012; Rasmussen & Anderton 2012; del Hoyo & Collar 2014; Phillipps & Phillpps 2014; Eaton *et al*. 2016; Myers 2016). Features that confirm this that are evident in the photos are its ***large size, slim build, long tail, small bill, wholly black upper parts including crown and tail, crest and most significantly, the diagnostic chestnut wings.*** However, as the subject differs from published illustrations and descriptions in underpart colouration, this apparent anomoly is discussed below.

Our bird had virtually wholly dark underparts, only the breast and underwing coverts showed any white. This is evident in the photographs taken on 8th December and was very apparent to Mike Carter when seen on 18th February. All texts and illustrations that we have accessed indicate that both adults and juveniles have wholly white underparts forward of the vent apart from an orange or brown wash on upper breast or/& throat. We have not found any evidence that this plumage has been described, illustrated or photographed previously. As the species is not sexually dimorphic it may be age related. Because the crest was not fully developed we consider the bird to be immature, presumably in its first year. But it seems unlikely that the dark underparts are a reflection of a young bird because the literature tells us that juveniles are paler, not darker, than adults, even having pale undertail coverts rather than black as in adult plumage. We therefore wonder whether there is a population somewhere that can have a mostly dark underbody but the species is supposedly monotypic.

The literature is confused on how fast adult plumage is acquired in Chestnut-winged Cuckoo even in the one book. Erritzoe *et al*. (2012) says on page 260 under the heading 'Description'; 'Juvenile crest begins to develop in about five weeks and adult-like plumage attained by three months'. In India is said to breed in the rainy season between April and August so should resemble adult by end of November. On that basis our bird should have been in full adult plumage when first seen. But under 'Moult' on the same page, that text states 'Adult plumage fully attained at about six months … on Thai-Malay Peninsula Jan. – Feb'. On that basis our bird might not yet have assumed full adult dress when first seen by birders on 3rd December and not even when last seen on 18th February.

World distribution

Chestnut-winged Cuckoo is a species that breeds throughout much of the orient from northern India (the Himalayas) to far eastern China. Some northern populations are migratory, wintering to the south in parts of India, Sri Lanka, South-East Asia (where it also breeds), the Philippines and the Indonesian Archipelago including Sumatra and Java (del Hoyo & Collar 2014: Erritzoe *et al*. 2012; Eaton *et al*. 2016). Despite its widespread range and non-threatened conservation status, nowhere does it appear to be particularly common. However, a 'large aggregation' of Chestnut-winged Cuckoos moved into the Huai Salak Phra valley in southwestern Thailand 'from late March to late April 1977 and were commonly seen every day as individuals or pairs'.

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