Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo *Surniculus lugubris* on Home Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, 16th December 2018

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

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Fig.1: Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo, Cocos, 16th December 2018
A crop by Mike Carter (MC) of the photo Fig. 4 by Paul 'the painter' taken off the web published in the note on 'Pam's Birds' Cocos birding blog posted on 17th December 2018.

Introduction

Despite two claims (BARC cases 942 & 1042) both from the Cocos (Keeling) Islands an Australian External Territory situated in the north-eastern Indian Ocean, there are as yet no accepted

records of Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo *Surniculus lugubris* from anywhere in Australia. An unsubstantiated report of an 'Asian Drongo Cuckoo' given the same scientific name that we use here is included in Appendix 1 of James & McAllan (2014), 'The Supplementary list of the birds of Christmas Island'. It is said to have occurred on Christmas Island on 6 March 2001 but no corroborating details are published or known.

Here we submit a fourth occurrence. The subject of this claim hit a window of Oceania House on Home Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands (12º07'S 96º54'E) on 16th December 2018 and stunned itself. A house-painter who was working on the building at the time whom we know only as 'Paul', took the photographs presented here. When it appeared to have recovered, he released it into the garden and it was not seen again. The site of this occurrence is precisely the same as that for the bird that was the subject of case 942 which was present from 30th November to 7th December 2016.

Paul showed the photos to Cocos summer birding residents Pamela Jones and Geof Christie seeking identification. They immediately recognised it as a Drongo-Cuckoo and Pam put the photos on her blog 'Pam's Birds'. Rohan Clarke saw the post and promoted the find more widely stating that he agreed with that identification. Mike Carter commented on line that the 'Very square tail makes this a Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo' and went on to say that the absence of white spots in the plumage of this individual indicates that it was an adult and therefore identification to species should be straight forward unencumbered by problems presented by birds in juvenile plumage. The 2016 bird (case 942) had a sprinkling of white spots on the upperparts and on the tips of the rectrices indicating a degree of immaturity. That suggested to BARC and advisors that the tail may not be fully developed and that therefore it might be a Fork-tailed Drongo-Cuckoo *S. dicruroides* (see photos attached) rather than the claimed taxon. Apart from voice which is of no help when identifying silent vagrants, tail shape is widely regarded as the most obvious and best distinguishing character. Susan Myers in her Helm Field Guide *Birds of Borneo* (page 154) gives two additional structural characters for distinguishing Fork-tailed from Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo. Apparently the bill of the former is more slender and it has a shorter primary projection.

The Bird

The only information we have regarding the bird is shown in Paul's photos. These, together with crops to the bird, are presented here. In comparison with the brick paving we estimate that if its neck was not retracted due to trauma it would be similar in length to one of the bricks, i.e. roughly 23 cm long. That is assuming that standard size clay bricks imported from England measuring approximately 22.5 x 11.2 x 7.6 cm were used to construct the paving.

The tail has 10 rectrices, T5 being several centimetres shorter than T4 and has at least two short white bars on the edge of the outer vane on the underside of otherwise dull black feathers. As seen in figures 5 & 6 the tip of the tail appears 'square' and there is no cleft or fork. That is that all full length feathers T1 to T4, appear equal in length. The two penultimate outer pairs T3 & T4, broaden at their tip producing a flared effect.

In general the impression is of a bird similar in size, shape and plumage to the 2016 bird that was the subject of BARC case 942. It differs in that the tail is even more square, has no fork or cleft at its centre, the plumage is not as glossy and it does not have the white spotting of that individual.

Upperparts are wholly black with a dark bluish-green gloss on the back, rump, wings and tail. There is a solitary small white spot on the hind crown, two or three tail coverts have a tiny white spot at their extreme tip. T4 lacks the gloss of T1 to T3.

Underparts: These are not well shown in the photos, only Figure 1 showing any detail. It can be seen that the whole of the head is matt black like the crown.

Bareparts: The orbital ring is neutral in colour; eye is dark, probably brown. Bill shape and proportions are those of a Wattlebird *Anthochaera* spp. and is blackish. Toes look weak and brownish.

Figs. 2, 3 & 4: Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo, Cocos, 16th December 2018
Photos by Paul 'the painter' taken from 'Pam's Birds' Cocos birding blog

Figs. 5 & 6; Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo, Cocos, 16th December 2018
Crops by MC of Figs. 3 & 4, the original photos by Paul 'the painter'

For comparison, below are photos of the 2016 bird that was the subject of BARC case 942.

Claimed Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo, Cocos, 6 December 2016
Photo by Mike Carter

Claimed Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo, Cocos, December 2016
Photos: top left by Mike Carter, top right by Geof Christie; lower two by Glen Pacey

Identification

The subject bird has ten rectrices, eight full length and the two outermost much shorter. Therefore it is not than a member of the superficially similar Drongo family which being a passerine has 12 rectrices. Thus it is a Drongo-Cuckoo. According to Payne (2005) and del Hoyo & Collar (2014), the taxonomy adopted by BARC, four species of Drongo-Cuckoo comprise the genus *Surniculus*, all of which breed in Asia. The IOC World Bird List (Gill & Donsker 2014) followed a similar taxonomy in Version 9.1 when we checked on line on 21 June 2019 as does Erritzoe *et al*. (2012) and we do so here. However not all authors adopt this treatment. For instance Robson (2008) and Eaton *et al*. (2016) consider *Surniculus* to be a monotypic genus. Since identification as a Drongo-Cuckoo is straight forward in that the bird resembled a slightly built Drongo, had mainly black plumage, a long flared tail and a Wattlebird-like bill (i.e. much thinner than that of a Drongo *Dicrurus* spp.) identification to taxon need consider only the following.

- Square-tailed Drongo-Cuckoo *S. lugubris*
- Fork-tailed Drongo-Cuckoo *S. dicruroides*
- Moluccan Drongo-Cuckoo S*. musschenbroeki*
- Philippine Drongo-Cuckoo *S. veluntinus*

As this bird had wholly black upperparts and lacked the liberal sprinkling of white spotting that adorned the subject of BARC case 942, it was in adult plumage.

Given their known distributions and movements, (Payne 2005; Erritzoe *et al*. 2012; del Hoyo & Collar 2014) both Square-tailed and Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoo are potential stragglers to Cocos. Moluccan and Phillipine Drongo-Cuckoos are sedentary species that reside on islands remote from Cocos and can therefore be discounted as potential visitors to Cocos. Tail shape is generally regarded as the main and possibly the only reliable distinguishing character. We believe that subtle differences such as degree and colour of gloss may also be distinguishing characters but the precise nature of these are difficult to ascertain and evaluate. In this case the tail fork is clearly and diagnostically that of Square-tailed Drongo-Cuckoo.

When the tail is fully grown as expected in adults with no sign of moult, Square-tailed has a shallower fork the difference between the longest (T4) and shortest (T1) being 0-6 mm according to Erritzoe *et al*. (2012) whereas in Fork-tailed it is 4-12 mm. The corresponding values in Rasmussen & Anderton (2012) are 1-9 mm in Square-tailed and 6-13 in one population of Fork-tailed and 22-26 mm in another. As there is no fork at all in the tail of this individual it cannot possibly be a Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoo, thus confirming its identity as the former.

Other supposed differences are the wing length and primary projection (del Hoyo & Collar 2014; Myers 2016). We have perused many images on the web and were unable to detect any consistent distinctions. That search did however reveal that Moluccan Drongo Cuckoo consistently has a tail shape similar to Fork-tailed Drongo-Cuckoo as stated in HBW Alive and as illustrated in Erritzoe *et al*. (2012), thus giving better authority for the elimination of that species. Philippine Drongo Cuckoo does however, have a similarly square tail but in all images the tail of that species appears relatively or proportionately much shorter than in the subject bird and in comparison to those of known Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoos.

We contend that the subject bird matches adult Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo as described &/or illustrated in several texts most notably the illustrations in Myers (2016) and Erritzoe (2014) scans of which are provided below. It also matches images of these species found during searches of the web in late June 2019.

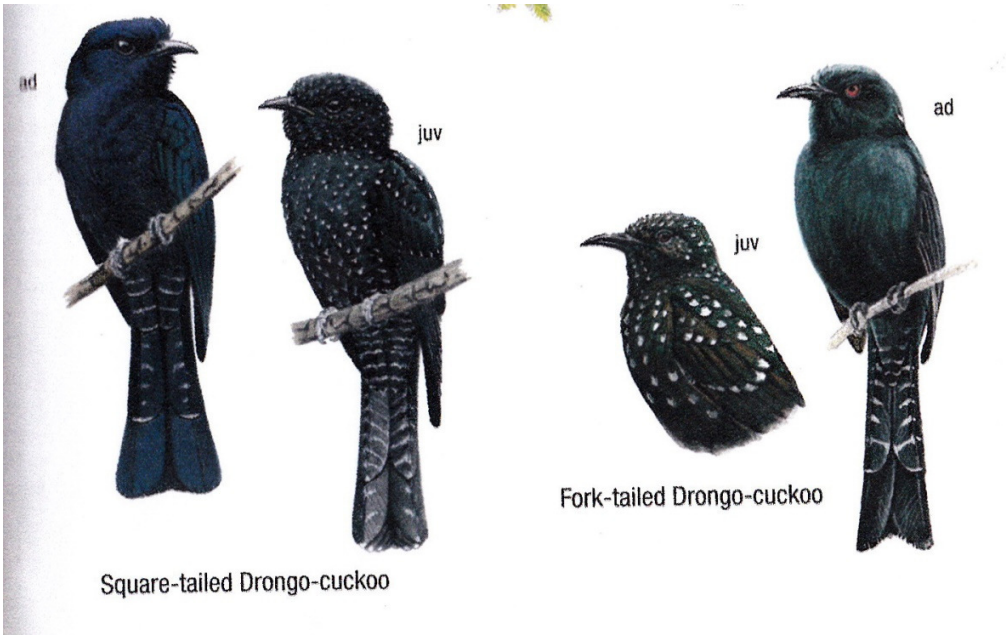
We asked two experts for an opinion on the identity of the bird. One has yet to respond and the other, Susan Myers, said that it 'certainly looks like a Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo' and that there were several reasons for eliminating Moluccan and Philippine Drongo Cuckoos.

Discussion

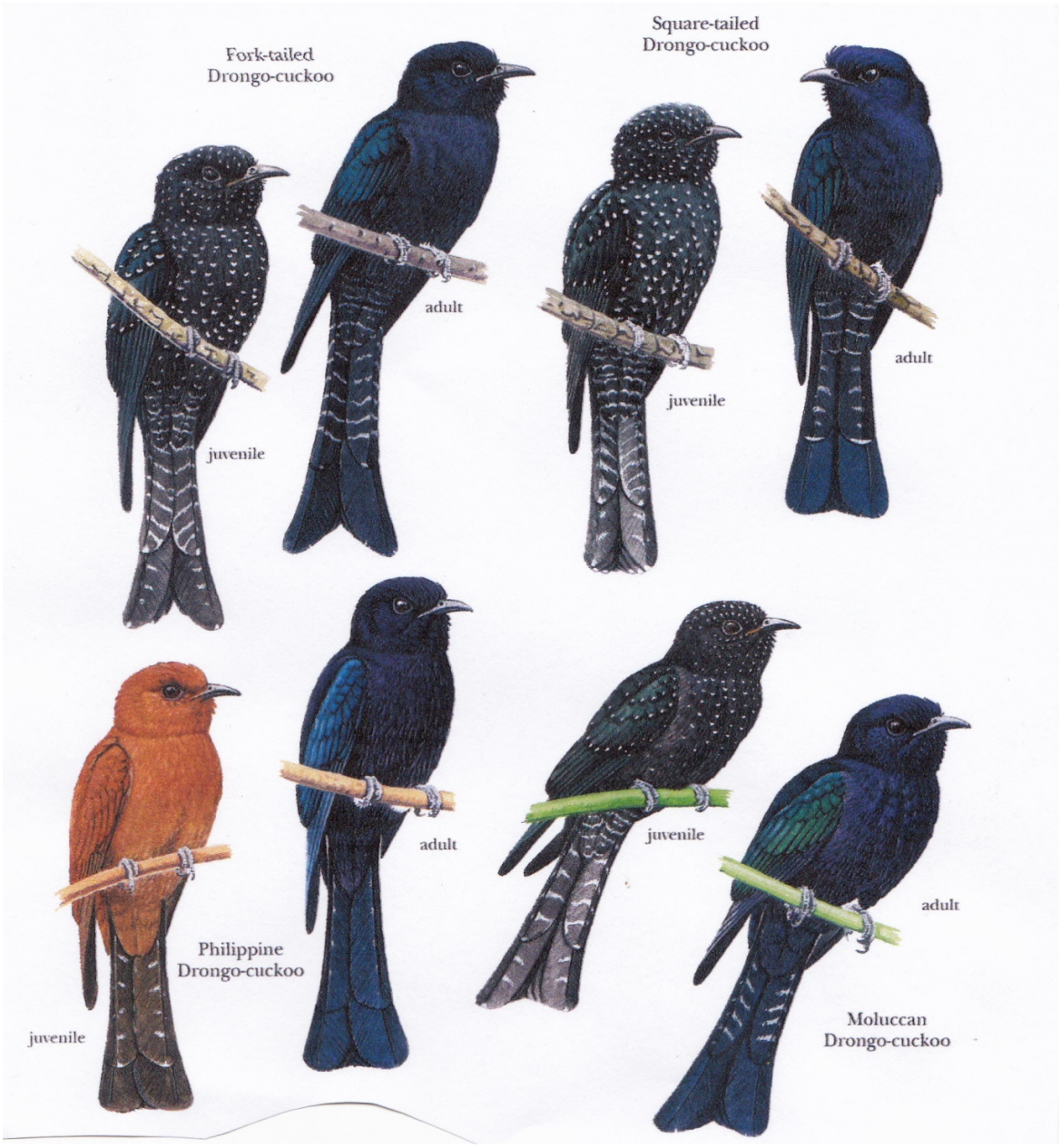
Square-tailed Drongo Cuckoo is an oriental breeding species with some northern populations, e.g. in the Himalayas, being migratory. It is thought that some winter in the Indonesian Archipelago where they also occur as a breeding species south to Sumatra, Java and Bali. As elsewhere in South – East Asia, it is difficult to distinguish migrants from residents (Erritzoe *et al*. 2012; Eaton *et al*. 2016). Perhaps, therefore, we should not be at all surprised that it has now occurred on Cocos.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Paul 'the painter' for taking the photographs of the bird that interrupted his work and for providing them to Pamela Jones. Without them this important knowledge would have been lost. We are grateful to Avril Whyte for allowing free access to the grounds of Oceania House. Tania Ireton provided scans of a significant reference. Susan Myers obligingly commented on a draft of this submission paying particular attention to the identification.



Square-tailed and Fork-tailed Drongo Cuckoo, Plate 59 in Myers (2016)



Drongo Cuckoos, Plate 23 in Erritzoe *et al*. (2014)

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