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KEYWORDS: Southern Crested Grebe, *Podiceps cristatus australis*, distribution, Lake Forsyth, land use.

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Channel-billed Cuckoos in New Zealand in spring 1996

Channel-billed Cuckoos (*Scythrops novaehollandiae*) range from Sulawesi in the west through the New Guinea region to the Bismarck Archipelago and northern and eastern Australia. The birds in Australia belong to the nominate race *S. n. novaehollandiae* and migrate south from the New Guinea region to subcoastal forests and woodlands in southern New South Wales, arriving in August to October (Mason & Forrester 1996). Their arrival in northern Australia during their northward migration in autumn coincides with the onset of the wet season, giving rise to such colloquial names as "storm bird", "flood bird" and "rain bird" (Readers Digest 1976). In Australia nesting birds usually parasitise currawongs and butcherbirds (Cracticidae) and crows (Corvidae) (Readers Digest 1976). Vagrants reach Tasmania, New Caledonia and New Zealand (Mason & Forrester 1996).

Until 1996 there were only two New Zealand records. The first is a bird presented to the Otago Museum by Mrs Thompson of Invercargill in December 1924 (Marples 1942). Its label gives no details of when or where the specimen was actually found

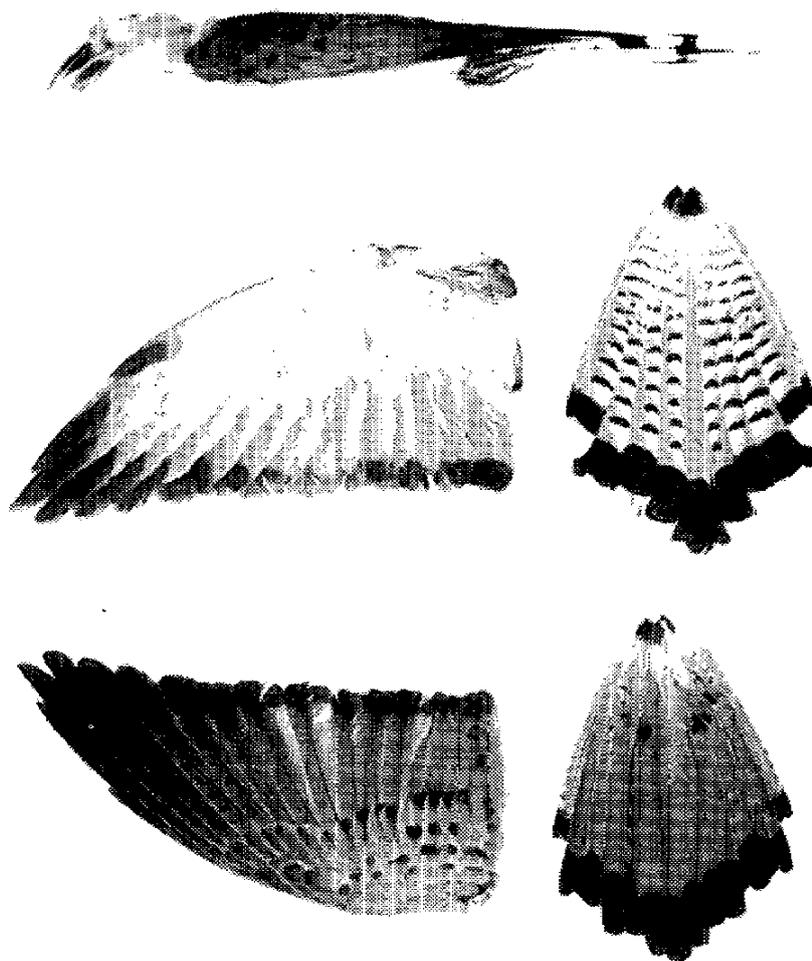


FIGURE 1 – Channel-billed Cuckoos: whole body and wing (upper and under surface), reg. no. 25346; tail upper and under surface, reg. no. 25345.

(pers. obs.), thus there is a possibility that it was brought to New Zealand already preserved. It was probably presented by “Mrs Thomson” (rather than “Thompson”), because its original label is from “Thomson & Co.” of Invercargill (pers. obs.). The second record is of a bird seen in Northland from October 1986 to January 1987, during which time it fed on the fruit of a Moreton Bay Fig (Howell 1987, Taylor *et al.* 1988, D. Ogle, pers. comm). In spring 1996 there were three additional New Zealand records (all dead birds), from Northland, Waikato and Wellington. This note documents each of the 1996 records. These specimens are held in the Museum of New Zealand (their registration numbers are given below).

1. Ocean Beach, Raglan, 14 October 1996. Reg. number 25346. Found washed up on the beach by Paul Cuming (Woolley 1996). This was the least decomposed of the birds found (Table 1). The iris was red; tarsus and feet grey; bill dark grey, becoming whitish at the tip. The plumage and measurements (Table 1) indicate it was an adult female, i.e. head and neck grey, upper parts dark grey with dark feather ends and red iris (see Readers Digest 1976, Strahan 1994).

The primaries and secondaries were slightly worn, upper wing coverts mostly slightly worn, but some very worn. The outer four tail retrices were slightly worn but the central

pair were very worn. The remainder of the plumage (head and body) was slightly or moderately worn. No active moult was found.

The stomach of this bird was empty. A male louse (*Cuculipbilus cuculipbilus platygaster*) collected from this specimen is the first New Zealand record of this species, which is host specific to the Channel-billed Cuckoo (R. Palma pers. comm.).

2. Te Pahi, Northland 30 October 1996. Reg. number 25345. The dried out corpse was found by Department of Conservation volunteer workers in mixed pasture/shrubland (Brackenbury 1997). As with bird no.25346, the tarsus and feet were grey, and the bill dark grey becoming white at the tip. The grey head, and dark grey upper wing feathers with blackish feather ends, together with its larger bill and wing lengths (Table 1), indicate that the bird was an adult male. The head, wing and tail feathers were all slightly worn except for the eighth outer primary on the left wing which was more worn than the adjacent wing feathers. There was no active moult. All body feathers were missing.

3. Pukerua Bay, Wellington 9 November 1996. Reg. number 25344. This bird was found dead on the beach by Alan Tennyson. The remains comprised the left wing only. The wing feathers were all slightly worn (including the eight remaining primaries) and the dark grey feathers with blackish ends and wing length (Table 1) indicate it was an adult male.

All three cuckoos appear to have arrived in New Zealand at about the same time, approximately the second week of October 1996. At that time, a low pressure system of about 980 millibars located in the south Tasman Sea spread a strong westerly airflow between Australia and New Zealand. It is quite likely that the associated strong winds blew the birds off course and across the Tasman Sea during their southward migration. This agrees well with the fact that migrating Channel-billed Cuckoos reach Sydney mainly in October (Strahan 1994). The 1996 New Zealand records coincide with records of two or three vagrant Channel-billed Cuckoos on Norfolk Island, north of New Zealand, also in October 1996 (Anon 1997, Christian 1997). Since 1984 there has been a "very marked increase" in numbers of this species in the Sydney region (Larkins 1994). An increase in numbers of this species in the southern part of its range could explain why four birds have been recorded in New Zealand since 1986 compared to only one record before that time.

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