

ANOTHER CUCKOO RECORD.

BY

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It was in mid-June 1919 when I first made the acquaintance of a female Cuckoo (*Cuculus c. canorus*) which laid no fewer than nineteen eggs this year with Reed-Warblers (*Acrocephalus scirpaceus*) as fosterers, by the discovery of a fresh type of egg deposited in a Reed-Warbler's nest in the main ditch of my hunting ground. Another Cuckoo had hitherto occupied this "territory," laying eight eggs in 1918, and seven in 1919 up to the 16th June, when my present bird arrived upon the scene and apparently drove her off, as I was not able to trace her subsequently.

The old bird was a very shy creature, most irregular in her habits, but well able to deposit her eggs safely in the most cunning places on the marshes. In strange contrast to my present one, she was never faithful to one particular fosterer; in fact, the seven eggs she laid in 1919 were deposited one each with Meadow-Pipit, Yellow Wagtail, Yellow Bunting, Sedge-Warbler and the remaining three with Reed-Warbler, the last named being apparently her natural fosterer. All these nests were on the confines of the marshes well within the bounds of her own territory. My present bird, who laid six eggs in 1919, sixteen in 1920, and nineteen in 1921, proved faithful to the Reed-Warbler throughout, and it is to her behaviour that I would refer, if only to deal with those points which concern her marvellous regularity as compared with many other Cuckoos I have from time to time had under observation. The locality used by this Cuckoo is an isolated rectangular ditch containing patches of reeds interspersed with tall hawthorns, sallows, brambles, etc. These bushes split the main circle of reeds into small beds, each of which is occupied by one pair of Reed-Warblers. I very seldom find two pairs of Reed-Warblers using the same small cluster of reeds. In anticipation of the return of my Cuckoo this year for the third time, I made an inspection of the marshes on May 12th, when I could only find three nests in course of construction. The condition of the reeds at this time was so poor that they hardly afforded any cover whatever. However, I was certain from previous knowledge of the Cuckoo that she took advantage of practically all the early nests, so on the 13th I made another inspection but could find nothing further than the three nests mentioned, one of which had

its first egg on this day and its second on the 14th. This morning the Cuckoo was very busy and in the company of two males hung about the vicinity of this nest all the morning. At 1.0 p.m. there was no change in its condition, but at 2.30 p.m., when I returned to the marshes after lunch, the Cuckoo had deposited her first egg, removing one Reed-Warbler's egg at the same time.

On May 16th she deposited her egg in the second nest, which by this time had got its second egg, removing one of these at the same time. On the 18th the third Reed-Warbler's nest held its second egg and the Cuckoo deposited her third egg in this, removing one Reed-Warbler's egg as before.

History was repeating itself, the Cuckoo availing herself of the most suitable nests as they became ready and depositing her eggs at the old times, namely, not before 1 p.m. and not after 2.30 p.m. This is what she did throughout 1919 and 1920 without exception. It was not until May 21st that I found another Reed-Warbler's nest. This had two eggs on May 24th and there was not another nest on the marshes in a suitable condition. At 1.25 p.m. the female Cuckoo came over with her two males and settled in a tall hawthorn immediately over it. She then flew into the reed-bed with one of the males, the other remaining in the hawthorn. The male Cuckoo came out first with the two Reed-Warblers in hot pursuit. He engaged their attention for some thirty seconds, when the female left the reeds bubbling and flew right off the marsh in the company of her two males. I let them get away, when I ran to the nest and found the Cuckoo's egg in it and a Reed-Warbler's egg missing. On the 26th she laid again in a nest containing two eggs, removing one of them as before, but on this date there was another nest on the marshes with two eggs also. On the 28th I visited this and found it with a Cuckoo's egg; but this time two of the Reed-Warbler's eggs had been removed, for on this date there were four. A careful survey of the incidents connected with the laying of these six eggs proves beyond all doubt the Cuckoo's wonderful inherited instinct for finding the most suitable nests. She made a break of four clear days following this, laying her next egg on June 2nd. By this time the condition of the reeds had considerably improved, and in consequence there were quite a number of nests in a fit condition to meet the Cuckoo's requirements. Little need be said as to the actual depositions of her remaining twelve eggs, which were laid on the following dates: June 5th, 7th, 9th, 11th, 13th, 17th, 20th, 23rd, 27th, 29th, and July 4th,

6th. Her last fourteen eggs were laid and deposited on the days of the laying of the fourth egg of her dupes and no egg was deposited before 1 p.m. nor after 2.30 p.m. This I can vouch for, and she carried out the same practices in 1920, when out of a total of sixteen eggs laid she, on no less than ten occasions to my knowledge, deposited her egg on the fourth day of her host, removing two fosterer's eggs at each time of depositing her own. It will be noticed that she deviated somewhat in her regularity of laying (every other day) in not laying on June 4th. This egg arrived on the 5th, but I attribute this to great cold on the third night and also on the fourth day. It is astounding that at each time of deposit she removed half the contents of the nest, on five occasions removing one egg from two and on fourteen occasions removing two from four. Her last two eggs were very small as compared with the others, which shows that her laying capacity had been severely tested. I attribute her great regularity to a certain extent to her fortune in selecting a locality where she was so immune from molestation. From May 26th, when she laid her fifth egg, she was never in want of a suitable nest, in fact, when I got her tenth egg there were fourteen nests in a suitable condition for the receipt of her egg. By suitable I mean nests containing either one, two, three or four fresh eggs.

This Cuckoo from past experience has the position on these marshes well in hand. The tall hawthorns which grow on the ditch banks are used by her as observation posts as they provide her with a good command of the reeds below. In all her depositions she is accompanied by one male and sometimes two. It is the males who engage the attention of the fosterers when she is on her business of deposition. Immediately after she has safely deposited her egg, she flies away bubbling with her one or two male consorts for two to three hours, possibly to feed, returning later to find the nest for her next egg, due forty-eight hours later. In this particular business she acts quite alone and to my mind this is the most interesting of all her movements. In finding nests for her subsequent eggs she will sit motionless for an hour on end watching a stretch of reeds from one of the tall hawthorns. Presently she will go down, remaining in the reed-bed for several minutes and very often leaving thirty or forty yards from where she first entered. This is the time to watch her as it often saves much time and hard work "doing" the reeds, which is much harder work than one would imagine. Upon leaving the reed-bed after such excursions she will always

betray the nest of her intended victim by circling round its vicinity several times, "bubbling" all the while. As soon as she commences this, she is joined by her males and they all fly off again together just as they do after the deposition of an egg. It is seldom that I have been disappointed in visiting a suitable nest after having seen her there previously. When this Cuckoo was about to lay her egg she would drop into the marsh grass some ten to twenty feet from the nest of her intended victim. She would remain there for roughly twenty minutes and she was always accompanied by her one or two males. I must emphasize this as it is not always the case, some females acting entirely upon their own responsibility in such matters. Upon rising from the grass she would betray no signs of her egg, but that she carried it to the nest in her bill I have no doubt, as one could readily see in almost every instance where she had stood on the edge of the nest to deposit her egg, as the side of the nest upon which she stood was weighed down upon the two reeds supporting it. Some nests are suspended on three reeds but the majority have four, and it is these the Cuckoo more often chooses for the deposit of its egg. The young Cuckoo will be safer between four supports and it is almost impossible for him to come to grief by falling overboard, although his bed is so very small as compared with his dimensions. He has two reeds on either side of him to which his bed is firmly laced and he can only come to grief either by moving backwards or forwards.

I made a systematic practice of visiting my nests at least twice a day, very often thrice daily, especially when my Cuckoo made breaks in her laying. These were very anxious times as one could not safely say whether an egg had been missed. I am sure, however, that all her eggs have been located and it was not until May 26th that she had any choice at all. Previous to this date there was never more than one Reed-Warbler's nest ready for her use, but after this date she always had nests available—and consequently her irregular laying is the more interesting and once again demonstrates the individuality of birds. I understand that Mr. Chance created facilities for his Cuckoo by removing the eggs of the fosterparents as soon as the Cuckoo's egg was deposited. Further, I believe he removed all eggs laid by his nine pairs of Meadow-Pipits whether they contained a Cuckoo's egg or not. In view of this I resolved to let my Reed-Warblers carry on in a natural way and instead of causing them to desert when I removed the Cuckoo's egg

I gave them other fresh eggs which I got from another marsh three miles away and left them to sit. In most cases these were hatched and reared, in any way I finally left the nests in good order and condition. In certain cases I found that after the eggs had been sat on for a week or ten days the nests became empty, and I am strongly of opinion that the Cuckoo revisited these nests and upon finding her egg missing removed the rest and caused the fosterer to build another nest for her subsequent use. This sort of thing I have noticed for the last five years in connection with Cuckoos that have used Reed-Warblers as fosterers. I watched it more closely this year and can prove on four occasions that my Cuckoo did deposit an egg in the rebuilt or second nest of the fosterer. The sixteenth egg was laid in the rebuilt nest that had received the fourth, the seventeenth occupied the second nest of the fosterer that had received the fifth, and the same thing occurred with those that contained the twelfth and sixth and the nineteenth and ninth respectively. It is well known that as soon as the nest of a pair of birds is destroyed they immediately set to work to build another. It is so with the Reed-Warbler : if the first nest meets a tragic fate they commence to pull it to pieces and build another with the same material a yard or so away. Three pairs had their second nests built and clutches of four eggs in eight days, which is remarkable, and the amount of work accomplished in the building of a second nest during the stay of an hour or so on the marshes is surprising. The use of the material from number one no doubt facilitates the work on number two and relieves the bird of a considerable amount of hunting for suitable material. In all cases where the Reed-Warblers hatched and reared their young they only had the one brood, but where for any reason the first nest was destroyed a second nest was proceeded with at once.

This theory of the Cuckoo destroying nests for her subsequent use is very interesting as the same thing has happened this year in the case of another Cuckoo using Wagtails as fosterers, first nests being destroyed in the same way. I have never been able to ascertain accurately what the Cuckoo does with the Reed-Warbler's egg she removes when depositing her own. In cases where she removes one I have never been able to find a trace of it, but in cases where she removes two I generally find one lying on the duck-weed or on the thick black ooze in the ditches. On the face of it it looks as though she takes one away at any rate, which being fresh she no doubt relishes ; but the second egg in cases where she removes two

undoubtedly goes overboard. So far as I was able to gather I had twenty-three pairs of Reed-Warblers nesting on this particular Cuckoo's territory this year and, curiously enough, at the end of June there were nineteen in one stage of occupation or another. This nineteen, of course, includes all, from those building to those containing youngsters ready to fly. I mention this as a coincidence to the actual finding of nineteen eggs. The only assistance I had was that of my friend Mr. H. Turner, who is associated with me in business and to whom I owe a debt of gratitude for the large amount of work he put into the job. I have decided that the most fitting receptacle for this series of nineteen eggs is alongside the series of twenty-one laid by the Meadow-Pipit Cuckoo of Mr. E. P. Chance last year. Mr. Chance will be pleased to afford an opportunity to all naturalists who are genuinely interested in the subject to call and examine these eggs for themselves.

I would just like to touch once more upon the marvellous regularity of this Cuckoo. On three occasions in 1920 I did not disturb her egg, which on each occasion I found with two fosterers' eggs. The Cuckoo's egg was in each case the first to hatch due to its not being deposited until the fourth egg of the fosterer was laid. It is not until the Reed-Warbler has her fourth egg that she begins to sit, consequently the Cuckoo's egg being deposited on this day also, is never allowed to get cold, with a result that it is the first to hatch. Last season these three eggs only took thirteen days to incubate, the young Reed-Warblers were hatched the next morning, viz., fourteen days, and in each case were hoisted out of the nest during the evening of the same day they were hatched. The young Cuckoo by this time would be roughly thirty-six hours old.

It is very interesting to see how zealously the hen Reed-Warbler guards the Cuckoo's egg given into her charge. One can approach a nest of highly incubated eggs a dozen times without seeing the hen Reed-Warbler sitting; but immediately she becomes possessed of the Cuckoo's egg she will almost allow one to lift her from the nest.

In conclusion, I am convinced that where the male Cuckoo accompanies the female on her egg depositing business it is for protection. This has been particularly noticeable in other cases where I have had Cuckoos under observation, especially where the fosterers are of a pugnacious nature such as Robins, Wagtails, etc. A little tragic incident will not be out of place here, as I have reason to believe that my

Cuckoo played a leading part in the tragedy. Another female Cuckoo occupied an adjoining territory. I found this bird in 1920 and had already found three of her eggs this year, all with Hedge-Sparrow's eggs in a low quickset hedge adjoining the marshes. A shortage of Hedge-Sparrows' nests, no doubt, caused this Cuckoo to trespass, for I found her next egg in the nest of a Reed-Warbler in the main ditch of my own bird's territory. Two days later I picked up the dead body of a Cuckoo roughly a hundred yards from this nest, and I never traced this bird again. The possibility is that this bird which used Hedge-Sparrows as fosterers needed no protection when dealing with such docile birds as Hedge-Sparrows and consequently trespassed on my own Cuckoo's ground where she deposited with the Reed-Warbler without any male consort.

I imagine that my female Cuckoo with her one or two males pitched into the intruder and had matters all their own way. In any case I never got another of her eggs and I have definitely given her up as lost.