

## VAGRANT CUCKOOS IN THE SOUTHERN INDIAN OCEAN: A COMMENT

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I note with interest how records of vagrant cuckoos of the genus *Cuculus* continue to occur in oceanic islands in the southern Indian Ocean. R.K. Brooke, in Newton *et al.* (1983), attributes a specimen recovered at Marion Island, Prince Edward Islands in November to an African Cuckoo *C. gularis*; Stahl *et al.* (1984) recorded European Cuckoo *C. canorus* at île de la Possession, îles Crozet in October and November, and Roux & Martinez (1987) provide records of Lesser Cuckoo *C. poliocephalus* (which was photographed) and a Redchested Cuckoo *C. solitarius* from île Amsterdam, the former in November 1982 and the latter between 21 December and the first week of January 1985. For four species of cuckoos to have been recorded as vagrants in this region within a decade calls for comment.

For the European Cuckoo, Fry *et al.* (1988) suggest that part of the eastern population crosses the Indian Ocean direct and record it as a scarce passage migrant at Aldabra and the Seychelles. They also conclude that most of the population of the (Asian) Lesser Cuckoo in southeastern Africa makes landfall direct from the Indian Ocean, and that it is also recorded in the Seychelles. It is accordingly not so surprising that these two long-distance migrants should on occasion reach much farther south and be recorded as vagrants at îles Crozet and Amsterdam Island. However, the instances of the supposed African and Redchested Cuckoos at Marion and Amsterdam Islands are somewhat different and need to be reconsidered critically. Both these cuckoos are intra-African migrants, but apart from the instances reported above, are unknown beyond the limits of the continental shelf (Fry *et al.* 1988).

Brooke (in Newton *et al.* 1983) following Payne (1977), attributes the immature specimen from Marion Island to the African Cuckoo, and based this determination primarily on the characters of the bill. The specimen was regarded as aberrant, having the plumage of the upperparts grey-brown barred with reddish brown; the pale tips to the crown feathers were obsolete, a character of the juvenile European Cuckoo (Payne 1977). However, Payne (1977) noted that all juvenile African Cuckoos examined were grey and that all European Cuckoos were rufous or brown and that no African Cuckoo was browner than the least brown European Cuckoo. Brooke also used the white spotting of the rectrices in support of his determination. However, as shown by Payne (1977) there is a degree of overlap in these characters between the two species and in the experience of the present writer, a completely satisfactory identification is often only possible using a combination of characters. It must also be noted that juvenile African Cuckoos have black bills (though clearly relative to age) and the barring of the rectrices only becomes distinguishable in adult plumage.

This specimen (TM No. 61912) is preserved in alcohol and was deposited in the collection of the Transvaal Museum, Pretoria. Through the auspices of T. Cassidy it was loaned to A. Msimanga at the Natural History Museum of Zimbabwe, Bulawayo where I was able to study it. On a combination of characters including the bill and not least in being browner above than grey, the bird is unquestionably a European Cuckoo in normal juvenile plumage. The four central rectrices are uniform brownish, barred tawny buff and lack the contrasting plain black subterminal ends that distinguish African

Cuckoos in similar plumage and which may prove as reliable a character as any in separating the two species.

In the case of the Redchested Cuckoo from île Amsterdam, Roux & Martinez (1987) relied on field identification but did not provide a description. However, J.-P. Roux (*in litt.*) has subsequently provided the characters used to identify the putative Redchested Cuckoo. These were: the broad and well defined reddish band across the breast; the combination of a yellow orbital ring and a dark brown iris on an otherwise apparently adult bird; and the very dark grey upperparts. While this would appear to be a fair description of a Redchested Cuckoo, confusion is still possible with the European Cuckoo where females often have the breast strongly washed with reddish buff giving a 'redchested' effect. It is not possible to explain the other differences except to stress that cuckoo identification in the field is often fraught with difficulties. However, the probability of any Afrotropical cuckoo of this genus wandering to islands in the southern Indian Ocean has yet to be firmly established and seems very remote, whereas the occurrence of both European (and Lesser) Cuckoos is now well documented and

particularly in the case of the former. Both species may be expected to occur as vagrants there with some regularity on southward migration and all the dates of occurrence are in accord with this.

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