

Long-tailed Cuckoos

Pathfinding in paradise

by Craig Robertson

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October is an important month for bird migration around the world. Northern hemisphere birds do it to escape the winter; in the southern hemisphere birds head for their summer breeding grounds. Most species of cuckoo are migratory, some of them flying long distances. Australia has about a dozen species of cuckoo and most have seasonal movements.

The Long-tailed Cuckoo *Eudynamis taitensis* is the greatest traveller of the southern hemisphere cuckoos. It is added to our list owing to its seasonal presence on Lord Howe and Norfolk Islands. Museum Victoria has several specimens of this species, mostly from New Zealand; there are eight beautifully preserved skins in their drawer, a few dynamically posed mounts, and skeletons.

Some of the specimens are over a hundred years old. Not unusually for a group like this, one of the skins is from John Gould, acquired around 1860, another from James Cockerell, a pioneering nineteenth century collector who gained his specimen in the Solomon Islands in 1879; others are of more recent twentieth century origin. They almost radiate with a sense of history, and perhaps some mystery too.

Long-tailed Cuckoos spend the winter months in the more tropical islands of the Pacific Ocean, anywhere from Palau to Pitcairn Island, but mainly in Polynesia. Their spring migration to summer breeding grounds takes them to New Zealand and its surrounding islands. From French Polynesia, the islands around Tahiti, the distance is over 3000 kilometres. It is in this group that it is thought the New Zealand Maoris had their ancestral home, the paradisaical land of Hawaiki. One of the nearer migration routes, from the Cook Islands - a likely stepping stone in their voyage - is about two and a half thousand kilometres. These routes are over open ocean.

Some students of Polynesian voyaging have theorised that the original discovery of New Zealand was made by following cuckoo migration. But it is a controversial idea. David Lewis, a sailor who made voyages replicating possible migration routes, was sympathetic to it but thought it was 'highly speculative'. Maori mythology is replete with stories of ancestral voyaging, notably by the hero Kupe. The mythology also acknowledges the existence and character of the Long-tailed Cuckoo, 'a lazy parent'. But there does not appear to be any definitive link between them and the voyaging.

Nevertheless, it is a persuasive idea. Long-tailed cuckoos are land birds. Individual Pacific Islands hold relatively few bird species, especially land birds. However unpopulated New Zealand was heavily forested, with a bountiful range of host species which cuckoos could parasitize; the result - lots of cuckoos. The lack of land mammals made birds more important culturally to the Polynesians too. Their presence and movements in the islands would have been prominent. Also they migrate over a period of two or three weeks, usually in October. They fly day and night, low over the ocean, calling loudly to each other as they go in a way that can be heard on the water in the dark.

A remarkable Australian, Harold Gatty, was probably the most prominent proponent of the bird migration theory, although by no means alone. As a young man he had been a seaman and had gained a thorough knowledge of navigation. He emigrated to the United States and rose to fame in 1931 as the navigator on a historic flight around the world in eight days. Along with the pilot, Wiley Post, he was given a ticker tape parade in New York and a medal by President Herbert Hoover. He was so successful in air navigation the Americans changed a citizenship requirement so he could serve with the US forces during World War II. He served with MacArthur's headquarters in the South Pacific.

In 1943 Gatty published *The Raft Book*, a survival guide for airmen at sea. It was included as standard issue in the liferafts aboard all Allied aircraft in the Pacific. The book contains a wealth of information on navigation at sea, including Gatty's ideas about how to navigate using the techniques of 'the greatest pathfinders in history', the Polynesians. As Gatty says, they would have observed the cuckoo migrations for many years. They understood bird migration long before Europeans, understood there was land where the birds were seen to go to, and then return from. They may have made numerous attempts to follow them. They were an adventurous people and brave sailors in canoes that they said 'dared the clouds of heaven'.

After the war Gatty settled in Fiji, founding Fiji Airways, which later became Air Pacific. He continued to write about navigation without compasses and modern technology, contributing to a fascinating literature about long distance sailing in the vast expanses of the Pacific Ocean. He wrote much about the stars of course, and sea-birds, the patterns of waves and swells, the movements of clouds and other phenomena observable at sea. But these are mainly useful when you already know where you want to go.

Just imagine you are far out from any known land at night, the infinite starry sky above and a seemingly infinite world of water around you, your next landfall an unknown distance away - and nothing but a bunch of cuckoos to guide you on your way. Brave sailors indeed.

Whatever the truth about Maori migration, it is certain that the adult birds in the Museum Victoria collection would have made great voyages across the South Pacific. There is a Long-tailed Cuckoo in *Wild*; it is down the front in the section *Amazing Animals of Australasia, Oceania and Antarctica*.

Further reading:

Harold Gatty *Nature is Your Guide: how to find your way on land and sea* (Collins, London, 1958)

David Lewis *We, the Navigators: the ancient art of landfinding in the Pacific* (ANU Press, Canberra, 1972)

For the sceptical view:

Andrew Sharp *Ancient Voyagers in Polynesia* (Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1963)