

## **The First Record of Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) in British Columbia.**

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### **Introduction and Distribution**

The Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) is a widespread passerine species found throughout the Old World during the breeding season from Western Europe (except in Iceland), parts of North Africa, across 45° E through Russia and Central Asia to the Russian Far East, Chukotka, Kamchatka, Commander Islands, south into north-eastern China and Korea (Snow and Perrins 1998, Brazil 2009, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009, Erritzoe *et al.* 2012). This species winters throughout Africa, Sri Lanka, and in the northern parts of Southeast Asia (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997, Brazil 2009). This species is found in both forests and lowland habitats including coniferous and deciduous forests, second growth, open woodlands, wooded steppe, scrub, heath land, meadows, and riverbeds (Snow and Perrins 1998, del Hoyo *et al.* 1997, Brazil 2009).

There are 4 recognized subspecies of the Common Cuckoo (King 2005). The nominate subspecies is (*C. c. canorus*) which is found breeding from Great Britain and Scandinavia, east through northern Russia and Siberia to Kamchatka and Japan, and in Europe south to the Pyrenees and the Mediterranean region, Asia Minor and northern Iran, Turkmenia, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, northern China, and Korea (MacKinnon and Phillipps 2000, King 2005, Erritzoe *et al.* 2012, Clements *et al.* 2017). This subspecies winters in Africa and in parts of Southeast Asia (Erritzoe *et al.* 2012, Clements *et al.* 2017).

The second subspecies of the Common Cuckoo is (*C. c. bangsi*) which is found breeding on the Iberian Peninsula, Balearic Islands, Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia and winters in Africa (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997, Clements *et al.* 2017).

The third subspecies is (*C. c. subtelephonus*) which is found breeding in Central Asia from Turkestan, east to southern Mongolia (in western Ala Shan) and winters in southern Asia and in Africa (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997, Clements *et al.* 2017).

The fourth subspecies of the Common Cuckoo is (*C. c. bakeri*) which is found breeding in South-Central China (western Sichuan) to the Himalayan foothills in northern India, Nepal, Khasi Hills, Myanmar (including Shan States), North-western Thailand, northern Laos, northern parts of Vietnam and southern China with these birds wintering in Assam in northeastern India, Bangladesh, and South-eastern Asia (Erritzoe *et al.* 2012, Clements *et al.* 2017). The Common Cuckoo is also found locally in the hills of central peninsular India, where birds range from the

paler subspecies (*C. c. subtelephonus*) to the darker subspecies (*C. c. bakeri*) (Erritzoe *et al.* 2012).

The Common Cuckoo is a highly migratory species in the northern part of its range, arriving in Europe between mid-April to the end of June (Kightley *et al.* 1998). Adult birds in Europe depart for their wintering grounds in Africa in the month of July (Kightley *et al.* 1998). Juvenile birds depart independently from adults during the months of August to September (Kightley *et al.* 1998).

The nesting season in Great Britain occurs in May and June (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997). In Algeria the nesting season occurs in April and May and in India and Myanmar the breeding season occurs April to June (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997). This species is famous for putting its own eggs into an unknowing host species through brood-parasitism (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). Hosts include many insectivorous songbirds (with over 100 having been recorded) including: old world flycatchers, old world warblers, old world chats, pipits, wagtails, and buntings (Jonsson 1992, del Hoyo *et al.* 1997). There some species that are only occasionally parasitized, while others will raise young cuckoos (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997). Eggs are polymorphic in colour (blue, pink or whitish) and can be spotted or unmarked in pattern (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997). Eggs are 23 x 17 mm in size with incubation lasting 11-12 days (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997). The nestling period lasts for 17-18 days and in that period the larger Cuckoo fledgling will evict the host species eggs and chicks (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997). Nestlings fledge at 80 grams and are then fed by their parent species for another 2-3 weeks (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997).

The Common Cuckoo feeds mainly on hairy caterpillars, less often on other insects such as dragonflies, damselflies, mayflies, crickets, cicadas, sometimes beetles, spiders, snails, and rarely fruit (Jonsson 1992, del Hoyo *et al.* 1997). This species often preys on the eggs of small birds (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997). Female birds will often forage up to 2-3 km from egg laying sites and males will feed up to 4 km from singing sites (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997).

Outside of their normal range, the nominate subspecies of Common Cuckoo (*C. c. canorus*) is an accidental vagrant in the North Atlantic Ocean region with records from Iceland, Faeroes, Azores, Canary Islands and Cape Verde Islands (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997, Erritzoe *et al.* 2012).

The Common Cuckoo is an accidental vagrant in eastern North America with a record of a first-spring female that was banded and photographed at Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, from May 3-4, 1981 (Vickery 1981, Baicich 2010) and a well photographed record from Quebec at Lourdes-de-Blanc-Sablon, Le Golfe-du-Saint-Laurent County on September 29, 2013 (e-bird Canada 2019).

This species has also occurred as an accidental vagrant in the Caribbean with a record from Barbados, on November 5, 1958 (Bond 1993).

In Alaska, the Common Cuckoo is a casual spring migrant and early summer visitant in the Western and Central Aleutian Islands, the Shumagin Islands, Gambell, St. Paul Island, and Nome (Gibson and Byrd 2007, Gibson and Withrow 2015). Away from the Bering Sea area, this species is an accidental vagrant with a record of a singing bird at Anchorage June 17, 1999 (Tobish 1999) and an adult well photographed at Harbor Mountain, near Sitka, from June 9-17, 2015 (Heinl 2015).

The Common Cuckoo is an accidental vagrant anywhere south of Alaska on the West Coast of North America. There is a single accepted record for California by the California Bird Records Committee of a well photographed first-fall female bird found in Watsonville, Santa Cruz County, from September 28-October 2, 2012 (Pike *et al.* 2014). The only other record south of Alaska is a recent addition to the avifauna of British Columbia with an adult bird found and well photographed in Haida Gwaii in mid-June 2018 (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). There is also an incredible record from Midway Atoll, in the northwestern Hawaiian Islands, on May 23, 1997 (Pyle and Pyle 2009).

The nominate subspecies is also accidental in winter in Indonesia with a single record off western Java (del Hoyo *et al.* 1997) and is an accidental migrant to Taiwan (Brazil 2009).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The Common Cuckoo is illustrated in most North American field guides. This is a medium to large sized species measuring 32-36 cm in length, with a wingspan of 54-60 cm, and weighing 115 grams (Brazil 2009, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The Common Cuckoo is slim, with long, rounded tail, and pointed wings (Jonsson 1992). This species flies at a moderate speed with regular wingbeats and will sometimes glide for a short duration (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The wings are mostly beaten down below the horizontal-plane (Kightley *et al.* 1998, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). In flight, the Common Cuckoo has a superficial resemblance and can be confused with smaller raptors such as the Eurasian Kestrel (*Falco tinnunculus*) or the Eurasian Sparrowhawk (*Accipiter nisus*), but these species flap their wings by raising them above the body (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The Common Cuckoo will often land rather clumsily (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). When perched the Common Cuckoo has a “straight-backed” posture with a forward pointing bill and will often sit in the open on telephone wires or a fence post (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). In flight, the underwing of the Common Cuckoo is rather uniform, with the coverts whitish in colour and

lightly barred; has a broader based silvery –white underwing panel that has a shorter central wing-stripe reaching only to p5-6 (Brazil 2009).

Adult males are plain blue-grey above and on head and breast (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). There is a sharp border below against finely dark-barrred white belly (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The underparts are white from the belly to the undertail coverts with narrow grayish-black bars (Brazil 2009). The iris, orbital ring, bill-base and feet are yellow (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). Adult females have 2 morphs; a grey morph similar to adult male, but at close range has rusty-buff ting and some dark barring on the breast; also a brown morph that is rusty above and on the breast and is often entirely rusty-coloured in plumage (Brazil 2009, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009).

Juvenile birds are slate-grey with often rusty-brown barring (Brazil 2009, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). The iris of juvenile birds is dark (Brazil 2009). Birds at this age are best identified by a white patch on the nape and narrow white feather fringes above (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009).

The song is given as a disyllabic call with emphasis on the first syllable, normally heard as “*goo-ko*” that can be heard as a trisyllabic sound when a bird gets excited (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). In pursuit flight often gives a guttural hoarse “*goch-che-che*” (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). Females can give a loud, rapid bubbling “*puhuhuhuhu*” trill (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). Young birds give a stubbornly repeated, squeaky, uninflected, slightly throaty “*psrih*” call (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009).

The Common Cuckoo is remarkably difficult to distinguish from the Oriental Cuckoo (*C. optatus*) (Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009). This species is found breeding from European Russia east through Siberia to Kamchatka, south to Kazakhstan, the Altai, Mongolia and northern China, Korea and Japan (Brazil 2009, Clements *et al.* 2017). The Oriental Cuckoo winters from South-east Asia to Australia (Clements *et al.* 2017).

In North America, this species is a casual m vagrant only in Alaska (Howell *et al.* 2014). The Oriental Cuckoo is a casual migrant in spring in the western Aleutian Islands and accidental in the central Aleutians on Rat Islands (West 2008, Gibson and Withrow 2015). The Oriental Cuckoo occurs between late June and late September as a casual migrant vagrant at Adak, Gambell, and St. Paul (West 2008). There is one record on the mainland at Cape Prince of Wales (West 2008). This species has not occurred in North America elsewhere (Howell *et al.* 2014).

This species is illustrated in most North American field guides. The Oriental Cuckoo is a slightly smaller species to the Common Cuckoo, measuring 30-34 cm in length, and weighing 99 grams

(Brazil 2009, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009) and appears slightly smaller tailed with a firmer (not so limp) posture (Jonsson 1992). The Oriental Cuckoo flies much more rapidly and is more direct than the Common Cuckoo (Brazil 2009) This species is much more secretive than the Common Cuckoo and favours staying inside the canopy of the forest and not out in the open (Brazil 2009). In flight the underwing of the Oriental Cuckoo shows bold white barring on the inner primaries and outer secondaries, and has barred underwing coverts (Brazil 2009).

Adult Oriental Cuckoos are similar in overall appearance to the Common Cuckoo. The Oriental Cuckoo is best identified by its distinctly yellowish-buff undertail coverts, lacking bars, but sometimes will show distinct dark spots (Brazil 2009). Markings on the undertail coverts (sometimes missing) are more broad blotches arranged crosswise which are narrower uniform bars on Common Cuckoo (Jonsson 1992). All differences with Common Cuckoo are subtle and partly subject to individual variation (Jonsson 1992, Mullarney and Zetterstrom 2009, Brazil 2009). The head appears bigger and the bill stronger (Brazil 2009). The grey of adults is slightly darker above on the wings and back (Jonsson 1992). The belly has on average broader bars on the belly (Jonsson 1992, Brazil 2009). Adult females can be either a grey morph which is similar to the adult males or a rufous morph (Jonsson 1992). It should be noted that the rufous morph is restricted to female birds (Beaman and Madge 1998). One key distinction is that the rufous-morph (sometimes referred to as hepatic morph) females and juveniles of the Common Cuckoo typically lack barring on the rump, while that barring is always present in corresponding plumages of the Oriental Cuckoo (Mullarney *et al.* 1999, Mann 2014).

The call of the Oriental Cuckoo disyllabic “*poo-poo*” that is quite different from Common Cuckoo in both syllables are similar in pitch and length to that of a Eurasian Hoopoe (*Upupa epops*) (Jonsson 1992). The calls are repeated 6-8 times and are delivered at a faster rate than that of the Common Cuckoo and are often given in a rapid series “*poo-poo-poo-poo-poo*” (Jonsson 1992). The Oriental Cuckoo has not yet been documented in British Columbia (Toochin *et al.* 2018).

Where the two species co-occur, many cuckoos not well observed are left unidentified to the level of species (Mann 2014).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

The Common Cuckoo is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia. The first record for the province was of an adult bird that was found and photographed by Michael Richardson and well photographed by other subsequent observers in Tlell, on Haida Gwaii, from June 10-15, 2018 (Hearne 2018). The bird was observed eating large grubs and was consistently located on the Richardson’s property in Tlell for the entire duration of its stay (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.).

Reports that this bird was heard vocalizing turned out to be erroneous as the culprit was a nearby Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) whose calls were unfamiliar to the local residents (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.). The bird was last seen eating constantly and moving around the property on the evening of June 15<sup>th</sup> and was not relocated the next day (P. Hamel Pers. Comm.).

The timing of this Common Cuckoo's appearance fits perfectly with birds moving northward to their breeding grounds in Eurasia and when vagrants have occurred in western Alaska (Gibson and Byrd 2007, Gibson and Withrow 2015). Though this bird was found in mid-June and is almost certainly a Spring overshoot that was likely brought to Haida Gwaii due to poor weather originating in Siberia (Meredith Pers. Comm.).

Since there is a fall record from California, keen observers along the west coast of the province and all over British Columbia should keep an eye open for this species in the future.



Figure #1: Record #1: Common Cuckoo adult at Tlell on Haida Gwaii June 10, 2018.  
Photo © Michael Richardson.



Figure #2: Record #1: Common Cuckoo adult at Tlell on Haida Gwaii June 15, 2018.  
Photo © Mary Helmer.



Figure #3: Record #1: Common Cuckoo adult at Tlell on Haida Gwaii June 15, 2018.  
Photo © Margo Hearne.





Figure #4: Record #1: Common Cuckoo adult at Tlell on Haida Gwaii June 15, 2018.  
Photo © Margo Hearne.



Figure #5: Record #1: Common Cuckoo adult in flight at Tlell on Haida Gwaii June 15, 2018.  
Photo © Margo Hearne.

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