

# Brood Parasitism by Pied Cuckoos on the Yellow-billed Babbler

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**O**bligate brood parasites are completely dependent on other species to raise their offsprings.

This form of parasitism occurs in about 80 species of birds around the world, (Payne 1977; Lyon & Eadie 1991).

The Pied Cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus* (Cuculiformes; Cuculidae) is widely distributed throughout the low country of Sri Lanka, being most numerous in the dry zone of the island. It belongs to the sub-family Cuculinae (true cuckoos), which are all parasitic on other birds in their breeding habits. They are referred to as brood parasites as they foist their eggs into the nests of various passerine species (Order Passeriformes), which incubate them and foster the young cuckoos (Henry, 1971; Harrison, 1999).

The Pied Cuckoo is parasitic on babblers: the Yellow-billed Babbler *Turdoides affinis* (Passeriformes; Timaliidae) being the main victim (Legge, 1983; Harrison, 1999). Henry (1971) states that the eggs of Pied Cuckoo, closely resemble those of the Yellow-billed Babbler "being similar both in size and in their beautiful turquoise blue colour". Although it is possible that Pied Cuckoos breed all year round, their peak breeding season is between February and May (Harrison, 1999).

This note describes two observations from the north-western and south-eastern dry zones, of Yellow-billed Babblers being victimized by Pied Cuckoos. Both incidents occurred outside their peak breeding season. Brood parasitism by Pied Cuckoos on the Yellow-billed Babbler has also been recorded from Arippu and Point Pedro in Jaffna (Legge, 1983).

## Observation at Tabbowa

The observation on Pied Cuckoos brood parasitism of Yellow-billed Babblers were recorded from a village home



garden, near Tabbowa tank

in the Puttlum District of north-western Sri

Lanka on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2004 at around 08:00 hrs. The observation was made on a dry morning in an area where the home garden is surrounded by scrublands with occasional tall trees.

A single Pied Cuckoo fledgling was observed being fed by a flock of Yellow-billed Babblers, which also had their own fledglings. The cuckoo was unable to fly on its own for long distances, and its gape still appeared yellow in colour. However, the Yellow-billed Babbler fledglings were more active and seemed to have grown faster than the cuckoo, causing the foster parents to pay more attention to the cuckoo. The flock of Yellow-billed Babblers defended the cuckoo from dangers, and an individual babbler fed it twice during the observation period of 10 minutes.

## Observation at Kirinda

A similar observation was made on 16<sup>th</sup> July 2004, at around 17:15 hrs. at Kirinda, in the Hambantota District in an area close to the outlet of the Kirindi Oya estuary. The habitat was a home garden dominated by coconut palms with a rocky outcrop on the seaside, and a small mixed mangrove stand and few patches of salt marshes on either side of the estuary.

There were two fledgling of Pied Cuckoos roaming around with a flock of about 13 sub-adult and adult Yellow-billed Babblers. The young cuckoos hopped than flew, as the babblers did. They continuously begged for food. They were younger than the cuckoo described in the previous observation and were incapable of perform-

ing long flights or even perch on branches. The author did not observe any fledglings of Yellow-billed Babblers within the flock. This implied a higher rate of fledging success in the parasitic cuckoo against their babbler siblings. It was also observed that, a single cuckoo fledgling was fed twice by two different babblers within a 10 minute period.

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# A sight record of White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus* in Pokunutenna, Sri Lanka

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While bird watching in Pokunutenna (located in the northeastern boundary of the Udawalawe National Park) on 22<sup>nd</sup> February 2007, I observed a flock of Swifts containing several species.

The observation was done using my Leica Trinovid 10 x 42 binoculars over a period of one hour. I observed several distinctly larger Swifts that were smaller than Alpine Swift *Tachymarptis melba* and it at once recalled a Needletail *Hirundapus sp* from the profile. Basically, it was different from the related local resident; Brown-backed Needletail *Hirundapus giganteus*, which I have seen in the general area of the observation by having a white throat and a horse-shoe shaped white mark in the ventral area (of the two features *H.giganteus* does not show a white throat). I could further observe that the white colour of the throat area and the ventral area was similar in intensity. The Swifts in question also showed a whitish mantle area clearly. Based on these facts, I was able to confidently exclude the two species; *T. melba* and *H. giganteus* and narrow down the identification to White-throated Needletail *Hirundapus caudacutus*, a species if this submission is accepted by the 'authorities' would be an addition to the Sri Lankan bird list.

The other species recorded in this flock of swifts included Little Swift *Apus affinis*, Indian Swiftlet *Collocalia unicolor* and Asian Palm-swift *Cypsiurus balasensis*. White-throated Needletail was reported by a visiting bird watcher in 2003 at Sinharaja but was not reported formerly.

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