

Recoveries from the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* (1970)—21

Zafar Futehally

Futehally, Z. 2009. Recoveries from the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* (1970)-21. *Indian Birds* 4 (3): 118 (2008).

Zafar Futehally, #2205 Oakwood Apartments, Jakkasandra Layout, Koramangala 3rd Block, 8th Main, Bangalore 560034, Karnataka, India. Email: zafar123@vsnl.net

The Pied-crested Cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus* is a bird that attracts us for its handsome appearance, its loud distinctive “tinkling” call, and for being the harbinger of the monsoon. I have personal experience of the bird arriving in Bombay from its southern quarters a couple of days prior to the advent of the rains in June. Stuart Baker, in his *Cuckoo Problems*, gives a list of fosterers parasitized by this bird. It seems that in the south its favourite dupes are babblers, while in the north, Laughingthrushes are its main hosts. In the March 1970 issue of the NLBW, Jamal Ara wrote an article based on the notes of her observations over several years, and I think you will find her remarks useful.

“Just as the dawn of spring is heralded in northern lands by the call of the cuckoo, the onset of the monsoons in India, both Southwest and Northwest is announced by the Pied Crested Cuckoo. No sooner the rains break than groves, gardens, and open woodlands echo to its metallic *piu...piu...pee-pee-piu*, repeated twice. Often, only the monosyllable *piu* is heard. If the clouds part and the moon shines down on a rain-soaked earth, this bird will immediately greet the effulgent moonlight.

“The Pied Crested Cuckoo is the most handsome of all the cuckoos, and is easily recognised. The upperparts of its plumage are black, while the lowerparts and the tips of its tail feathers are white, and prominent in flight. There is in each wing a conspicuous white roundish patch, and a black crest that does not lie down, but projects prettily from the back of the head. In flight, which is direct and laboured, the tail is kept pointing slightly upwards. But it is not necessary to set eyes on it to recognise it, only to hear it, is sufficient.

“Like all cuckoos it is mostly arboreal, but unlike the other members of its family, it perches on the tops of low bushes—scrutinising their foliage carefully for the insects on which it feeds. Beetles, tree-crickets, and hairy caterpillars from its diet. Often food is taken from the ground, where the bird hops about in search of insects.

“The Pied Crested Cuckoo does not indulge in elaborate courtship—it is carried out on the wing with the tail partly spread out, the wings are beaten slowly and deliberately, as if practising some sort of delayed action flight. Of course, the courtship of no cuckoo is silently and the Pied Crested Cuckoo is no exception—it makes a noise all the time while courting. The bird is neither shy nor retiring, and one bird chasing another is a common sight. It is a parasitic bird, and wherever it is found, it lays according to the breeding season of the various babblers, in whose nests it deposits its eggs, from January to July. The eggs are a perfect imitation of those of the babblers—spotless sky blue, highly glossy, varying in length. In the Eastern Himalayas it has been found placing eggs in the nest of the Necklaced and Blackgorgeted Laughing thrushes, while in the

Western Himalayas it is the Striated Laughing Thrush. The eggs of this cuckoo (northern) referred to in Hume’s *Nests and Eggs of Indian Birds* (Vol. 3, pp. 388–391) were found in the plains of India or in the lower ranges of the Nilgiris or sub-Himalayas.

“September is the month in which to look out for young Pied Crested Cuckoos. Those that I have seen in Daltongunj (Palamau) and Saitba (Singhbhum) differ considerably from the adult in appearance—being slaty grey above, the wing patch, and the tips of the outer tail feathers and lower portions, pale yellowish white. They were accompanied by young Jungle Babblers clamouring for food and flapping wings, just like the young babblers. But in Monghyr the young cuckoos were always seen unaccompanied by foster-brothers or sisters.

“The Pied Crested Cuckoo is a restless bird, moving about a good deal, seldom staying more than a couple of days in one spot. The typical race is resident in Ceylon, South India north of the Coromandel Coast, and the southern Bombay Presidency, as far north as Karwar on the west and Madras on the east (Stuart Baker). The rest of India and Burma is inhabited by the larger form (*serratus*) which is migratory, being a rains visitor (breeding), appears to come from Africa. In India it spreads throughout the plains and hills alike, up to about 8,000 feet in the Himalayas. The movements of *serratus* have not been fully worked out, but there is reason to believe that it winters in Africa. But much remains to be discovered regarding the distribution of this cuckoo. It appears to undergo considerable local migration. The SW monsoon begins to set in over northern India around June, and that is when this bird arrives. Again the NE monsoon breaks over the Nilgiris in January, and the Pied Crested Cuckoo reaches that area in the cold weather. Several observers, particularly in northern India have communicated to the papers the dates on which they first saw or heard the bird. Dewar saw it in Madras in July, at that time it is supposed to migrate northwards.

“Sustained observation on the arrival of this bird was maintained by one observer for ten years in Chota Nagpur, and he recorded arrival dates between April 21 and May 28. The last date on which he observed the bird was 21 October. In Monghyr and Madhubani it is very common from May to October. At different places ranging from Jhansi and Almora in the west and Chittagong in the east, the dates vary between 20 May and the first week of July. The majority of dates being in June, almost coinciding with the break of the monsoon. In Burma it has been observed between late May and early November...”