

FIRST RECORD OF A *CUCULUS* CUCKOO ON MIDWAY ATOLL AND THE HAWAIIAN ISLANDS

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On 23 May 1997 we found and photographed a gray-plumaged cuckoo of the genus *Cuculus* on Midway Atoll, constituting the first record of this genus in the Hawaiian Islands and in the central Pacific Ocean east of Palau. We suspect it was a Common Cuckoo of the southeastern subspecies (*C. canorus telephonus*) but cannot eliminate the Oriental Cuckoo (*C. saturatus*) at this time.

Pyle discovered the cuckoo at about 1530 as it flew down the active runway toward Frigate Point at the southwestern tip of the island. He alerted Nestler by phone, then, in the company of several volunteers assisting with seabird research, pursued the bird around the vicinity of Frigate Point. We saw the bird both sitting and in flight and obtained several photographs (Figure 1). The bird was last seen at about 1630 flying



Figure 1. Cuckoo (*Cuculus* sp.) on Midway Atoll, northwest Hawaiian Islands, 23 May 1997.

Photo by Peter Pyle

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into a grove of ironwoods (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) to the south of the runway. We observed the bird for a total of 5 to 10 minutes, with 8× and 10× binoculars, at ranges as close as 20 m.

Both of us recognized the bird as either a Common or an Oriental cuckoo, and we concentrated on the underparts and undertail coverts of the bird, knowing that this area was important for identification but not knowing how these two similar species differed in the plumage of this region. We described the bird and Pyle sketched it before consulting any literature. The following is a composite description based on these original field notes:

A large cuckoo, larger than a Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) and about the size of a female Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) or, in direct comparison, a Brown Noddy (*Anous stolidus*). The upperparts, head, and breast were uniformly medium-dark gray with a bluish tinge. The cuckoo was about the same color, if not a bit paler, than that of the upperparts of an adult Sharp-shinned or Cooper's (*Accipiter cooperii*) hawk. The tail was blackish or black, contrasting distinctly with the paler back and uppertail coverts. When the bird wheeled in flight (being chased by noddies), four or five partial white bars across the tail were visible. The underparts below the breast were white, with indistinct grayish barring. The grayish bars were approximately 1 mm wide and did not contrast markedly with the white base coloration. The exact point at which the barring stopped, ventrally, was not noted, but the undertail coverts and vent area appeared to be white, without barring. The iris was yellow. The bill was blackish above with a yellow base that extended farther along the mandible than along the maxilla.

The literature (e. g., Cramp 1985, Redman 1985, Parkes 1990, Kennerley and Leader 1991) indicates that the Common and Oriental cuckoos are difficult to separate in the field, the Oriental averaging darker on the upperparts, which do not contrast markedly in color with the tail, and buffier or more ochre on the underparts, with thicker and blacker barring, the ochre and barring extending to the undertail coverts. The subspecies of the Common Cuckoo occurring in central Asia and Japan, *C. c. telephonus*, has paler barring on the underparts than does the nominate subspecies occurring from Europe to Siberia (Cramp 1985, Parkes 1990, Kennerley and Leader 1991). The Oriental Cuckoo shows moderate geographic variation in size but little or no variation in plumage (Cramp 1985). To evaluate the identification of the Midway bird, Pyle examined all 24 specimens of the Common and all 7 specimens of the Oriental Cuckoo at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology (MVZ), Berkeley, California. This specimen examination confirmed the variation noted above (see Figure 2) and suggested that the Midway bird was a Common Cuckoo of the subspecies *telephonus*.

The specimens of the Common Cuckoo included 17 *telephonus* and 4 *canorus*. The specimens of *telephonus* (nine of which were collected between 18 May and 7 June) had very indistinct barring on the underparts and, especially, the undertail coverts in comparison with nominate *canorus* and the Oriental Cuckoo (four of which were collected between 16 and 27 May); there was no overlap among the specimens in underpart plumage between *telephonus* and either of these other forms (Figure 2). The bird of Midway had barring that matched the paler specimens of *telephonus*; in particular, a bird collected 23 May 1953 near Seoul, South Korea (MVZ 130838; Figure 2), was nearly identical in underpart plumage to that of the Midway bird. Additionally, the Oriental Cuckoos all had buffy or ochre-colored base coloration to the underparts and undertail coverts, in contrast to the pure white coloration of the Common Cuckoos and the Midway bird. These specimens imply that *telephonus* differs in underpart plumage more from nominate *canorus* than the latter does from the Oriental Cuckoo, as noted by Parkes (1990).

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Figure 2. Specimens of *Cuculus canorus canorus* (right two birds), *C. c. telephonus* (center two birds), and *C. saturatus* (left two birds). In each case the specimen (of those at MVZ; see text) with the boldest barring within each form is on the left, and the specimen with the sparsest barring is on the right. The appearance of the bird from Midway matched the paler specimen of *telephonus* (third specimen from the left). From left to right, MVZ 101637 (collected 12 May), 109077 (2 July), 143575 (17 September), 130838 (23 May), 134619 (19 May), and 140272 (16 May).

The upperparts of all Common Cuckoo specimens were similar in coloration, and differed from those of all specimens of the Oriental Cuckoo in being paler and contrasting markedly with the dusker tail. The upperparts of the Oriental Cuckoos were uniformly dark grayish to dusky, contrasting only slightly with the darker coloration of the rectrices. Again, in these differences, the Midway bird matched the Common rather than the Oriental Cuckoo.

The best ways to separate Common and Oriental cuckoos in the hand are by the amount of barring on the carpal coverts and the pattern of the underwing coverts (Parkes 1990, Kennerley and Leader 1991), areas that were not observed on the Midway bird. Although the Midway bird matched the pale extreme of the Common Cuckoo specimens examined, there may be overlap in underpart plumage between *C. c. telephonus* and the Oriental Cuckoo, perhaps confounded by age/sex-specific variation. The full range of this overlap, if it exists, has yet to be determined (M. R. Leven, P. J. Leader, and G. Carey pers. comm.). Thus, until a thorough study is made, we feel it prudent to leave the specific identity of the Midway bird indeterminate. Should there prove to be little or no overlap in underpart plumage between Oriental Cuckoo and *C. c. telephonus*, however, we would feel confident considering the Midway bird as the latter.

In the western Pacific, the Common Cuckoo has been recorded in Palau but on no other islands of Micronesia (Pyle and Engbring 1985, Pratt et al. 1987, Reichel and Glass 1991), whereas the Oriental Cuckoo has been recorded in Palau and Yap (Pyle

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and Engbring 1985) and perhaps is the more expected species in the region (Pratt et al. 1987). Both species reach Alaska rarely but regularly (Gibson and Kessel 1997).

The Midway record constitutes the first for this genus in the Hawaiian Islands. A Yellow-billed Cuckoo photographed on Laysan Island on 1 November 1994 (R. L. Pyle pers. comm.) constitutes the only other record of a cuculiform in these islands.

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