NOTES

COMMON CUCKOO (*CUCULUS CANORUS*) COURTSHIP IN SOUTHWESTERN ALASKA AND SUMMARY OF OCCURRENCE IN THE STATE

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Imminent expansion of the breeding range of the Common Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) from Asia to North America has been predicted by Dinets et al. (2015) and Ogden (2016), who pointed to the number of recent records of the species in Alaska as a response to continuing climate change. Their having postulated an "invasion" (Dinets et al. 2015:248) from the Russian Far East via the Bering Strait and their having referred without details to "a courting pair…in Alaska" (ibid.:245) have prompted the preparation of this note.

On 20 June 1995 at the close of a week's fieldwork in the outer Shumagin Islands, which lie off the south side of the Alaska Peninsula, I arrived at Sand Point (55° 20′ N, 160° 30′ W), on Popof Island, to spend several days collecting bird specimens in alders (*Alnus crispa*) constituting Tall Shrub Thicket habitat (Kessel 1979). As I drove out of the village in morning fog at 07:00 on 21 June 1995, I was surprised to see a distinctive *Cuculus* cuckoo—then unknown so far east in Alaska—perched on a roadside post. It flew low across the road, perched again, low, then flew around a copse of alders on a low hill and disappeared; in the ensuing two hours I was unable to find it. But at 10:00 at nearby East Head, I heard the repeated "cúck-oo', cúck-oo', cúck-oo" of a Common Cuckoo and then observed two cuckoos in what I took to be courtship flight (see Cramp 1985)—the male calling "cúck-oo" repeatedly as the two birds flew side by side with deep slow wingbeats. They flew in a wide circle of 150–200 m diameter, no more than 10 m up, that returned them to dense alders and willows (*Salix*) 3–4 m tall. The male then flew off, calling constantly both in flight and perched. I pursued and collected the bird (Figure 1), then returned to the area where both had first gone

Figure 1. UAM 6678, adult ♂ *Cuculus canorus canorus*, 21 June 1995, East Head, Popof Island, Shumagin Islands, Alaska. A, lateral view; B, ventral view.

Photos by J. J. Withrow

into the alders, but in a lengthy search I could not find the female. At about 18:00 that day and 0.8 km from this area, in my only additional glimpse, I observed at a distance a Black-billed Magpie (*Pica hudsonia*) pursuing, though not vigorously, a *Cuculus* in flight 15 m up. Probably storm-carried so far east (see Gibson and Byrd 2007), these birds had apparently arrived (separately or together) seasonally too late for courtship on 21 June to be propitious, since the only potential passerine hosts in the immediate vicinity—the Hermit Thrush (*Catharus guttatus*), Pine Grosbeak (*Pinicola enucleator*), Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*), and Golden-crowned Sparrow (*Zonotrichia atricapilla*)—were on that date probably all feeding recently hatched young.

The Common Cuckoo has had a substantiated history in Alaska only since specimen records began to accumulate from fieldwork in the western and central Aleutian Islands, beginning in 1971 (see Byrd et al. 1974, 1978, Kessel and Gibson 1978, Gill and Handel 1980, Winker et al. 2002, Lehman 2005, Gibson and Byrd 2007, Gibson and Withrow 2015, Schwitters 2015). Before 1971, the few Alaska specimens of *Cuculus* had been identified as *C. canorus* (see Palmer 1894, Friedmann and Riley 1931, Murie 1936, Hanna 1947), but subsequently all of these were reidentified as Oriental Cuckoos (*C. saturatus horsfieldi* = *C. optatus*) (see Deignan 1951, Murie 1952, AOU 1957). To date, all records of these species on the Alaska mainland have been of lone birds, as have most reports elsewhere in Alaska beyond the Aleutians. The spring of 1999 was a notable exception—when at least seven Common Cuckoos were reported 3–18 June at St. Paul Island, Pribilofs, and up to four were reported 6–13 June at St. Lawrence Island (Tobish 1999). Only in the western Aleutians have there been numerous records of multiple cuckoos, often twos or threes, and once a scattered group of at least eight, including a singing male (see Gibson and Byrd 2007). The Shumagin birds provided the first Alaska observation of a *pair*.

Thus the preponderance of *Cuculus* records in Alaska come from the western and central Aleutians (52° N, 172° E to 176° W), which area—still distant from continental North America—these birds have reached through long transoceanic passage from departure points in Asia over 1600 km south and west of Bering Strait (65° N, 169° W). Cuckoos look very out of place in the treeless, windswept, maritime Aleutians, and I suspect that most of them there, as well as on Bering Sea islands to the north and east, do not survive the summer of their arrival. Moribund cuckoos have been found in midsummer (e.g., Univ. Alaska Mus. [UAM] 3250, adult ♂, one of three present, 1–3 July 1972, at Kiska Island, Aleutians; see Byrd et al. 1974), and *Cuculus* remiges have been recovered from a Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) aerie (UAM 3261, 11 July 1972, at Amchitka Island, Aleutians).

On the Alaska mainland, lone Common Cuckoos have been recorded at widely separated localities and intervals: in western Alaska on the Yukon–Kuskokwim delta (Gill and Handel 1980; UAM 3733, 11 June 1979) and near Nome (UAM 5470, 13 June 1988), in south-central Alaska at Anchorage (17 June 1999; Tobish 1999; audio recording UAM), in northern Alaska on the Colville River delta (9–11 September 2008; Tobish 2009; photo *N. Am. Birds* 63:185, 2009), and, most recently, in southeast Alaska at Sitka (9–14 June 2015; Tobish 2016; photos UAM). So far as I know there has not been an Alaska report of multiple Oriental Cuckoos.

At this juncture I think it is not possible to distinguish clearly the contemporary results of observers' wider and more regular coverage of Alaska from the possible responses of cuckoos to climate change, or from the compounding of those two factors (note well the exceptional year 1999, above). At all events, *Cuculus* cuckoos would appear to have an uphill struggle to expand their breeding range/s into Alaska—either near the Arctic Circle, where the continents are close together, but where ecological and environmental conditions present severe constraints and where few cuckoos have occurred; or on Alaska's Pacific rim, where most of Alaska's cuckoos have occurred, but where long flights over water to reach acceptable habitat and hosts remain daunting.

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