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Editor: Dr. R.M. Harwin.

The Interloper

I was staying last year at the Principal's house at Goromonzi School, and above the window of my room there was a fanlight kept open by a metal bar. Early on the 27th October, I noticed a piece of cobweb hanging from the middle of this bar; I was away all that day, but in the evening noticed the beginning of a nest on the bar – some dried leaves and thin grass twisted round. After that, I watched the builder, a little female sunbird, busily at work day after day. The Scarlet-chested Sunbird male spent his time fluttering round the purple salvias in the garden.

The nest grew quickly through all stages from a fragile framework affair to a firm cosy little cave into which the busy little creature stuffed soft-looking materials. Every time she arrived at the nest she gave a chirpy little squeak. On the 8th November, the nest seemed to be completed and ready for occupation. Her motto was "If you want a thing done, do it yourself".

On the morning of the 9th November, I happened to look up at the nest, and saw what looked like a large brown leaf sticking out from it. The leaf then flew away, and I realised that what I had seen was a cuckoo's underparts. It may have been reconnoitring, but was probably depositing an egg in the nest, having carried it up in its beak. The timing was so clever: just as the nest was completed, the cuckoo arrived.

On the 10th November, the sitting process had obviously started. The devoted little mother sat there happily, her head with its long beak sticking out, and sometimes even hanging down. She made frequent sorties during the daytime, but was never off the nest for more than five minutes. We could not see into the nest, as it was too high above the ground, and I refrained from climbing up on a ladder, as I did not want to scare the bird.

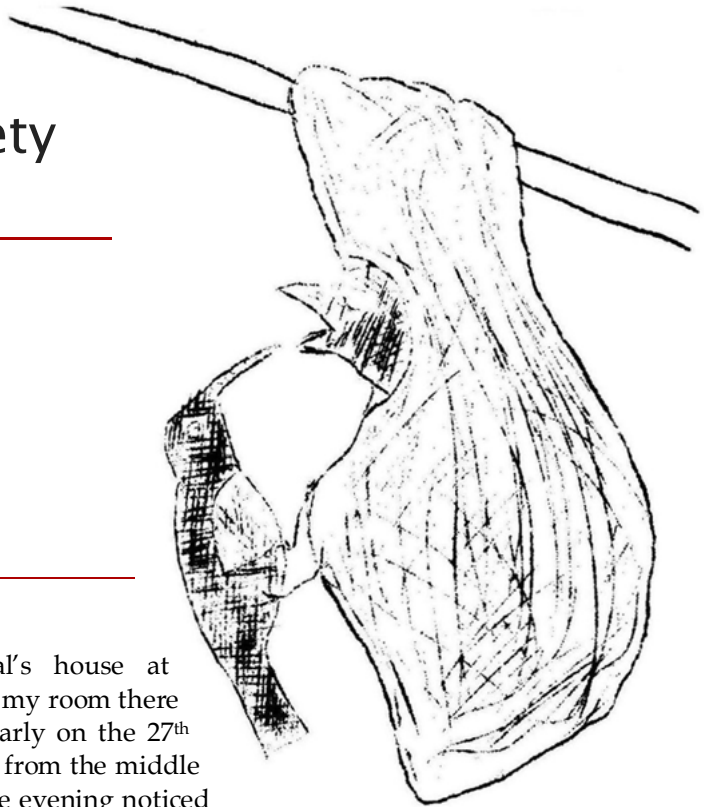
On the 13th November at 11.15, I again saw a cuckoo at the nest. Whether it was the same cuckoo as before, I cannot say, and of course, for all I know, there may have been many more cuckoo visits, which I did not see.

On the 19th November, I actually saw the little male bird taking an interest and fluttering in front of the nest – the father visiting the maternity ward? On the 21st, it was obvious that the hatching had taken place, for the little mother bird flew backwards and forwards all day long, bringing food of some sort and stuffing it down a throat or throats, and I could hear the squeaks of the young as the mother came near.

Then, sad to say, my visit to Goromonzi came to an end, and so I was not there on the day on which the young emerged from the nest. But the story was continued for me, and I can go on with it, as given to me in a letter.

"And now the news for which you'll be waiting – the CUCKOO! Well, it was very sad. There were no little sunbirds, only this one enormous and greedy baby cuckoo, who kept the little mother flying to and fro all day with food.

When we had all become quite certain that it was too big to get out of the nest, (it had been trying hard for *days*) mummy came out to report that it had fallen out. We all went to see, and there it was, a bit shaken, but unhurt. It then hopped on to a low branch of a Pride of India outside the bathroom.



Then we spent the whole morning watching its efforts at flying short distances. Mummy, most reluctantly, had to tear herself away and return to town, and so missed the first long flight (which was watched by Pa and Ma sunbird). Then it flew to the violet-bed under the big fig-tree and sat exhausted among the violets. From there it hopped into Richard's hand and was loth to leave. After he had put it down, the little parents kept hovering over it, trying to make their huge child fly up into the tree, which eventually he did. Since then, we have seen it almost daily in the garden, and it still, after two weeks, calls in its funny way, and the little mother brings it food. I can't remember the name of the cuckoo, but it is number 352 [Diderick Cuckoo] in *Roberts' book* – the commonest type".

E.M. Watson, Essexvale.

Another cuckoo story from Dr. A.W. Wragg, of Plumtree:

On the 23rd November, 1959, at a farm ten miles from Plumtree, an unusual bird was seen trying to get into the nest of a Sparrow Weaver [White-browed Sparrow-weaver] near the house. The Sparrow Weavers took great exception to this, and set about the bird in no small way, eventually beating it almost unconscious to the ground, where it was picked up and put into a metal fish-keep-net.

On the morning of the 24th, a pure white egg was seen in the keep-net, but the bird, unfortunately, broke it in hopping about. On the 25th, a second pure white egg was in the nest [net], and the bird and egg were sent to me for identification. This was pretty easy and it turned out to be a female Klaas's Cuckoo.

I took the bird from the net and placed it on the ground, where it hopped about, but was still unable to fly. Careful examination showed no serious injury, and I left it in a mulberry tree in the garden. It was later seen to fly away.

The egg itself is pure white, and measures 21.4 x 14.2.

H.E. Hornby also has something to say about cuckoos. This time it is the African Cuckoo in the Hartley District.

I wonder if the unusual behaviour of the African Cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus gularis*) this year, as observed on this farm, is general for the country. Most years it is a noisy bird; this year it is a silent one.

I am unsystematic in my note-taking, but I have several marginal notes showing that the usual time for first hearing this cuckoo is the middle of September, and thereafter it is usually heard many times every day for two or three months. I may say that to me the call is exactly the same as the Hoopoe's, when this is disyllabic, and some weeks ago an African Hoopoe called in this manner without a change for so many minutes that I made a special journey to its tree to make sure what species of bird it really was that was calling.

This year is one of unusual dryness, and the winter was frost-free in this neighbourhood. In consequence the spring flush of plant and insect life was much restricted, and it may be on this account that the African Cuckoo is silent.

I have not heard one with certainty. The birds have arrived, and on several occasions I have seen a pair chasing one another and being in turn, chased by Fork-tailed Drongos. I think birds as a whole are more silent than usual during this time of grim drought; for example, the Red-chested Cuckoo was first heard at the normal time of October 17th, but has been heard rarely since. But to keep to the subject of this note, is the silence of the African Cuckoo this year a widespread or merely a local phenomenon?

In a later letter, Mr. Hornby has commented further on the silence, not only of the African, but also of other cuckoos, and of the unusual behaviour of birds in general. I should be grateful for any comments readers may have to make concerning Mr. Hornby's observations, or any observations of their own on bird behaviour during the present season of drought.

I do not, however, think that the drought has anything to do with the next query, raised by Mr. J.M.E. Took, in connection with the Knob-nosed Duck. He writes,

I should be grateful for readers' views as to whether in the Knobnose Duck [Comb Duck], *Sarkidiornis melanotos*, the male only has the knob on his bill. Authority certainly supports this view; Delacour and Scott, Volume III, 1959, Praed and Grant, and *Roberts* 1957, all state briefly that the male has the caruncle and the female has none. Certainly my recollections with birds I have shot bear out this view. On the females there has sometimes been a little bump on the upper mandible, but certainly nothing in the nature of a knob that one could hold with forefinger and thumb. The point of my inquiry is this: "On the 24th of January I saw at Rainham Dam near Salisbury exactly 90 Knobnose. Every bird had a knob on the bill. Some were bigger than others, but in every case it was a growth that could have been held by forefinger and thumb on either side. The size of the birds varied. I am well aware that male and female Knobnose differ considerably in size, but I would not like to say whether there was as much variation as this in the birds I saw in the field. If only the male has the caruncle on the bill, then all these 90 birds were males. I have never before come across any such thing in my own experience, nor have I heard of anything like it with wildfowl anywhere else, except of course such things as eiders during the breeding season when the females are sitting. I should much appreciate anyone's views on all this."

G.W. Parnell, who spent a holiday at "Togo" Keynes' fishing camp on the Zambezi in September 1959, has sent some notes on the birds seen. He writes:

The following may interest members who are also fishermen. The camp is situated on the Northern Rhodesian bank some 80 miles upriver from Livingstone on the Barotseland border, and opposite the Caprivi Strip, the last 40 miles there being up river by boat. The fishing is good, tiger going up to 16 – 17 pounds and bream of several varieties up to 4 – 5 pounds. There are large herds of Red Lechwe on the flats behind the camp, and also Roan, Zebra and some 60 Jumbo on the Caprivi side. Bird life is at its best in May and June when many species are breeding on Bird Island some 6 miles upstream from the camp. At this time too, the flood water is receding from the flats, leaving pans at which Togo has put up hides where one can film the vast flocks of birds which congregate there.

Southern Carmine Bee-eater and Little Bee-eater. There are many colonies of the former, some large, along the banks, and many were breeding.

Wattled Cranes. Our tame bird named "Longone" lived in the camp, and was a complete humourist, stealing all he could get his beak to, and doing a sort of Salome dance each evening with bits of reed.

African Fish-eagles galore. Two which frequent the spot will stoop to a thrown fish – very photogenic.

Storks. Marabou Storks not very common, considering the number of native fishing camps. African Openbills galore and a few pairs of Wood Ibis [Yellow-billed Stork].

African Skimmers. These commence nesting as soon as the sandbanks appear, and we found a number of nests with eggs (2 – 3) and young, and came upon one with the egg just chipping, so that Togo was able to film the complete process of the chick's emergence from the shell.

And last, but by no means least, a tame otter in the camp, named Jimmy – a most charming creature.

House Sparrow The only response to my request in the November *Bulletin* for House Sparrow records comes from Capt. Stevenson, who writes, "I had reason to call at the Forestry Commission garden in Gwelo last week, and saw to my surprise, sparrows at the bird bath there, which I at once identified as *Passer domesticus*. The only difference I noticed from those I knew in England and elsewhere in Europe was that they looked cleaner. I will have to wait for a better opportunity to get specimens to find out which race they belong to, because people don't like birds being shot at their bird baths."

However, I have frequently noticed House Sparrows near my house since moving to Bulawayo, the first being seen on November 13th. They must by now be quite widely spread, but I am still waiting for definite records from Salisbury, where they are said to have become established first.

And finally, I have to announce that, as I am being transferred back to Gwelo, my address as from the 1st March 1960 will again be P.O. Box 647, Gwelo, and that I will be glad to receive any contributions to the next number at that address.