

Channel-billed Cuckoos performing a previously undescribed courtship display

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On 21 October 2013 at 5:17pm the alarm calls of many Noisy Miners *Manorina melanocephala* were heard at my home in Budgewoi (33°14'10"S 151°33'56"E) followed by calls of a Channel-billed Cuckoo *Scythrops novaehollandiae*.

I took my camera outside to see two Channel-billed Cuckoos pursued by around a dozen Noisy Miners, at least two Pied Currawongs *Strepera graculina* and three or more Australian Magpies *Cracticus tibicen*.

The Channel-billed Cuckoos landed in a tall tree, while the other birds made alarm calls and dive-bombed them.

An initial view through my 400mm lens suggested the top bird was feeding the bottom bird, which I interpreted as courtship display between an adult pair, since juvenile cuckoos are normally fed by a host parent. In any case Channel-billed Cuckoos are summer visitors and it was too early in the

breeding season for fledged juveniles. Later examination of my photographs confirmed that both birds were in adult plumage.

When I got closer I took 220 photos of this behaviour in an eight-minute period.

Meanwhile the attack and alarm calls of the other birds were relentless, until they put the cuckoos back into the air, calling as they flew into the distance at 5:25pm followed by some of the other birds.

When I reviewed the images on my computer I noticed that the cuckoos were not feeding, instead they were holding each other's upper mandible and lower mandible between their upper mandible and lower mandible. Mostly the cuckoos were observed to be taking each other's lower mandible between their upper and lower mandible and tugging on it. In many images they are almost touching bills, but in subsequent images they were

holding each other's bill or throat and I believe this was a "playful Mexican stand-off" to try and grab their mate's bill.

They were also captured in many later photos tugging at each other's throats with their bills individually or in some cases at the same time (**Figure 1**).

While conducting these displays the cuckoos were very vocal, accompanied by fanning their tails and flapping their wings while they tried to ignore the attempts by the local birdlife to move them on.

I attribute my observations to courtship behaviour but they differ from previous accounts of courtship feeding by Channel-billed Cuckoos, which involve the male offering a stick insect to a female as a prelude to copulation (Higgins 1999). Johnson

(1983) provided a detailed description of this behaviour in which the female was apparently attracted by the offer of the stick insect, and took and swallowed it immediately after copulation. In the case of the behaviour documented in the present note no copulation was observed. Possibly my observations involve rituals associated with pair formation, whereas the courtship feeding involving food transfer is a precursor to copulation.

REFERENCES

Higgins, P.J. (Ed.) (1999). 'Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds Volume 4: Parrots to Dollarbird'. (Oxford University Press: Melbourne.)

Johnson, C. N. (1983). Courtship Feeding and Mating in the Channel-billed Cuckoo. *Corella* 7: 44.



Figure 1. Pair of adult Channel-billed Cuckoos tugging at each other's neck in a courtship display.