

ENDEMIC SPECIES FEATURE

KOEKOEĀ Long-tailed cuckoo *Eudynamys taitensis*

Koekoeā or the long-tailed cuckoo (*Eudynamys taitensis*) is little-known forest bird species native to Aotearoa/New Zealand. Koekoeā are largely insectivores but can also be a fearsome predator for small vertebrates, including tiny rifleman/tītipounamu (*Acanthisitta chloris*) nestlings!

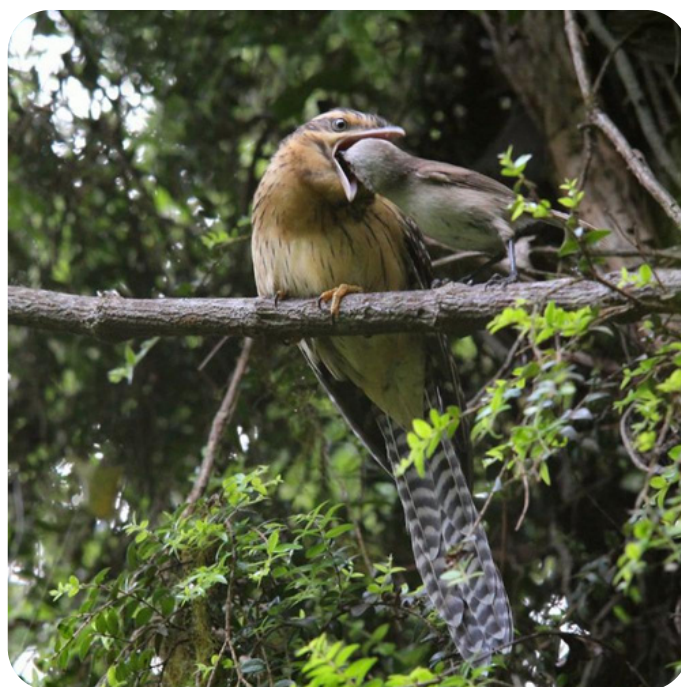
The koekoeā is rarely seen and often difficult to observe closely. In flight however, its long tail (as long again as its body) makes it unmistakable even though its shape may superficially resemble that of a falcon. The harsh and piercing screeching zzhweeep call is another point of distinction.

It has several unique life history traits that are highly intriguing: together with its cousin the pīpīwharauora or shining cuckoo (*Chrysococcyx lucidus*), koekoeā is the only migratory forest bird species in the country. Koekoeā carry out long annual trans-oceanic migrations from and to their vast overwintering grounds covering an arc of Pacific islands extending 11,000 km from Palau (Micronesia) in the west to Henderson Island (Pitcairn group) in the east. After an up-to 6,500 km long migration koekoeā arrive in spring and start breeding in October. Unlike the shining cuckoo, koekoeā only breed in New Zealand and nowhere else which means it is an endemic breeder.

Like most cuckoos koekoeā are parasitic: they lay a single egg in the nests of pīpipi/brown creepers (*Mohoua novaeseelandiae*), pōpokotea/whiteheads (*Mohoua albicilla*) (North Island) or mōhua (*Mohoua ochrocephala*) (South Island), which incubate it and then rear the chick. No detailed studies about their breeding ecology have been carried out and many details of the eggs and young are poorly known.

Koekoeā is probably the least studied forest bird in New Zealand and most of its life history traits remain an enigma. For example, no population estimates or densities are available. However, koekoeā threat status has recently been moved from 'At Risk – Naturally Uncommon' to 'Threatened – Nationally Vulnerable' due to a significant decline in numbers based on call count data. Their main threat is the ongoing decline of host species, which has occurred in large parts of New Zealand. For example, mōhua were once one of the most abundant forest birds, inhabiting all forest types across the South Island, but now only occur in a few isolated populations in the South Island.

Koekoeā have never been recorded in the Brook Waimārama Sanctuary but there has been at least one record in the Nelson area in recent times. Therefore, reintroducing threatened mōhua to the Sanctuary would also allow koekoeā to return.



Adult whitehead feeding much larger koekoeā chick
Photo credit: Adam Clarke, www.nzbirdsonline.org.nz



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