# WYRE FOREST, CUCKOOS AND THE SECRET

**Neville Wilde**

In the first years of the twenty first century we sadly find our forest of Wyre with a number of its notable species of wildlife missing or reduced to a hitherto unknown scarcity. The vagaries of both global and local climatic changes and the ever increasing levels of airborne pollution have inevitably taken their toll. Although most wildlife is adaptable there is a limit to the rate of change with which many species can cope and for a number this appears to have now been exceeded. Wyre has always been a working forest producing timber and other products and as such has always been in a state of change. Felling of trees has benefitted some species by creating temporary open spaces and caused others to migrate to other less disturbed parts of the forest, generally there has always been a suitable refuge within the forest bounds. However when the changes which occur affect the whole forest at the same time the result is all too frequently a loss of species.

A newcomer to the forest, walking through the woodlands in summer now, can appreciate the wonderful diversity of wildlife which still abounds. They could only guess however at the abundance which would have surrounded them in times past. For example the richness and variety of the birdsong they might hear now is a mere echo of that which filled the air only two or three decades ago. There are still a few people that can remember the forest as it was in the early part of the twentieth century but memories become unreliable and for a clearer picture of the forest in those days we have to rely on the written record or on what has been related to us in conversations long past and noted down at the time. Unlike the present day, now that they have become so scarce in the forest, in those days the purring of turtle doves *(Streptopelia turtur (L))* accompanied by the calls of Cuckoos *(Cuculus canorus (L.))* filled the air through the long summer days of June. Dawn choruses were deafening, nightingales *(Luscinia megarhynchos (Brehn))* still inhabited the forest, nightjars *(Caprimulgus europaeus (L.))* churred through twilight hours and hedgerows and meadows were filled with nesting birds in their season. Bird life was abundant everywhere and the horse a common animal on the roads as well as the on the farm. Following in the wake of the parties of men felling trees with axes and crosscut saws, charcoal burners tended their earth covered kilns converting the branch wood left behind.

Accumulated knowledge about the habits and the anatomical details of birds was well advanced at the beginning of the century and already published in many beautifully illustrated books. Details of bird behaviour, particularly at the nest had been gathered through keen observations over the years by a number of ornithologists and oologists who were usually gentlemen of independent means or clergymen. Much of the anatomical information had been obtained by the Victorians through the expediency of taking specimens for examination usually by shooting.

Unsolved bird mysteries however still existed and caused much heated debate among the experts of the day both in the British Isles and in Europe. Principal among these was the procedure adopted by the Cuckoo when depositing her eggs in the nests of other birds. How such a large bird could place an egg in for example a wren's *(Troglodytes troglodytes (L))* domed nest without demolishing it? had caused observers to speculate that the Cuckoo laid her egg on the ground then transferred it into the nest of her chosen fosterer using her beak. Cuckoos had frequently been seen perched and in flight with eggs in their beaks and this was taken to be the proof.

We now know that the eggs of Cuckoos are laid directly into the fosterer's nest and have evolutionary adaptations regarding size, colour and incubation period. They are very small for a bird as large as an adult Cuckoo to lay being only slightly larger than the eggs of a song thrush *(Turdus philomelos (Brehn))*. They are however significantly larger than those of most of the species they parasitise. The eggs have comparatively thick shells and are thus robust enough to survive rough treatment during laying. The colour is often rather similar to the eggs of the chosen fosterer and the incubation period of about twelve days is the same or shorter than that of the fosterer. The female Cuckoo is able to retain the egg in her body for a considerable time and then is able to expel it in a matter of seconds. The bird books published before 1922 contained a variety of explanations regarding the laying habits of the Cuckoo but the true facts remained the Cuckoo's secret.

## Investigations In The Forest

It was the dedication and persistence of a keen amateur ornithologist and his many helpers that first unlocked the Cuckoo's secret and provided the proof necessary to convince the sceptics of the day. The locality where these important facts were revealed was Wyre Forest, the site where most of the painstaking observations took place was at Pound Green Common.

Edgar Chance was a wealthy business man and a member of the family who owned the Chance Glass works in Birmingham famous among other things for the manufacture of lenses for lighthouses. As an



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executive of the company as well as birding on evenings and weekends, he found himself able on occasion to spend additional time pursuing his hobbies. In addition to ornithology his predominant interest seems to have been oology. Despite its destructive consequences, the collecting of bird's eggs for study at this time was commonplace although disapproved of by some bird enthusiasts.

Some observations published over a number of years regarding the laying behaviour of the Cuckoo persuaded Edgar Chance to believe that he might be able to devise a method by which he could reliably study individual Cuckoos.

In 1892 Dr. Eugene Rey of Leipzig wrote in his monograph, (Edgar Chance had this translated into English) that his studies of the Cuckoo over many years showed that -

"As there is an immense difference between the eggs of different female birds in the case of the Cuckoo, the correspondence between the eggs of each individual bird furnishes us with an excellent means of studying the life habits of the individual, because its eggs serve us as proof of identity. And such an aid to identification is especially valuable in the case of the Cuckoo, which shows local and individual differences in its habits very much greater than those observed in the case of any other bird."

Further in 1915 Mr. E.E. Pettitt writing in "Wild Life" noted that his study of Reed warblers parasitised by a Cuckoo showed that by examination of her eggs he could determine that she occupied a breeding area of no great extent and did not lay elsewhere.

Subsequently when Edgar Chance made contact with his friend Mr. O.R. Owen of Knighton he received the information that in the 1916 season Owen had found a number of eggs of several Cuckoos in the nests of Meadow Pipits *(Anthus pratensis (L.))* in a certain area. This last piece of information proved to be vital in the investigations which were to follow because it pinpointed the area in Wyre Forest called Pound Green Common which on examination turned out to be ideally suited for Edgar Chances Cuckoo studies.

**The First Season 1918**

Towards the end of May of the 1918 season Edgar Chance found himself listening to the calls of several Cuckoos on Pound Green Common. He had been searching there on evenings and at weekends for the nests of Tree Pipits *(Anthus trivialis (L.))*. Although he had no definite plans for a close study of the Cuckoo during the 1918 season, it dawned on him that here was an ideal place to begin his investigations. In his own words,

"For here I had a small and comparatively open piece of ground under a mile in circumference. On most of three sides it is bordered by forest, on the remainder by orchards, and here and there are trees placed as if on purpose to provide ideal observation posts for Cuckoos. The configuration of the ground is of a gently undulating nature supporting a growth of young gorse and bracken varied by barer patches where at one time and another the common has been set on fire by mischievous village children. Greatest advantage of all is that it is an isolated breeding ground of Meadow Pipits, the chosen fosterers of the Cuckoos in occupation. There is no other breeding ground of this species within a nearer distance than three miles, and this became a source of particular gratification to me, for I was quickly impressed with the evidence of female Cuckoos occupying particular territories in which they are, so far as circumstances permit, parasitic upon a single species.".

In this first season between June 3rd and July 6th 1918, Edgar Chance and his companions collected all the eggs of the two Cuckoos which had territories on the common and noted any young Cuckoos that had already hatched when found. They referred to these birds as Cuckoo A which laid eleven eggs, two of which were found already hatched, and Cuckoo B which laid four eggs. All were in the nests of Meadow Pipits except for one of Cuckoo A's which was found in a Skylark's nest. All of the eggs laid by each Cuckoo were found to be alike and had a coloration, size and pattern unique to the bird. This fact formed the basis for the reliable identification between the various Cuckoos met with throughout the investigation.

**The Second Season 1919**

As might be expected Edgar Chance and his companions eagerly awaited the 1919 season. Both Cuckoo A and Cuckoo B returned to the common and as far as could be ascertained by diligent searching, between May 18th and July 5th eighteen eggs were laid by Cuckoo A and two by Cuckoo B. Two of Cuckoo A's eggs had already hatched when found all the other eggs of both Cuckoos were collected to estimate their state of incubation and hence their date of laying. All of the eggs had been laid in the nests of Meadow Pipits. The eggs of three more Cuckoos ( C, D and E) which had laid in other nests on the common were also found C's in a Hedge Sparrow's *(Prunella modularis (L.))* nest, D's in a Pied Wagtail's *(Motacilla alba (L.))* nest and E's in a Tree Pipit's nest. Another egg of Cuckoo D was found on June 1st in a Pied Wagtail's nest some half a mile from the common.

I am reminded here of a conversation I had with my late friend George Jeffs on 7th July 1979. He had known the forest all his life and had been a schoolboy at the time that Edgar Chance was carrying out his Cuckoo studies. George told me that Edgar Chance became a well known figure in the area and that he had offered the local children a

reward of five shillings for any complete nest containing undamaged the egg of a Cuckoo and the

eggs of its fosterer. Five shillings was a considerable sum of money in those days and it encouraged too great a predation on the local bird's nests so the reward was soon halved to two shillings and sixpence, still a significant sum and apparently more than enough to achieve the desired result at a time when a bag of sweets could be bought for a penny.

The conclusions drawn from the 1918 and the 1919 season's work were that female Cuckoos could not lay eggs more frequently than on alternate days. As far as was possible providing one at a suitable stage of development was available she would prefer to lay in the nests of her chosen fosterer which she had previously observed being built. The fosterer chosen was probably the species by which she herself had been reared.

**The Third Season 1920**

The aims drawn up for the 1920 season were to prove absolutely the theories of the previous seasons and in addition to determine if possible how many eggs a Cuckoo was capable of laying in a season under "ideal" conditions. In order to do this it was necessary to find every egg as it was laid by the Cuckoo and to arrange that there was always a nest at the right stage of development to provide the Cuckoo with an incentive to lay. In the anticipation that Cuckoo A would return it was therefore going to be essential to locate and maintain under daily observation throughout the season, every Meadow Pipit's nest on the common. Fortunately Cuckoo A did return. In the anticipation of this event Edgar Chance was anxious to prevent any Meadow Pipits on the common from hatching young before Cuckoo A might return. Preliminary searches of the common were made on the 2nd, 5th and 9th of May during which six clutches of Meadow Pipit's eggs were found and taken. On the 15th May the first egg of Cuckoo A was found in a Meadow Pipit's nest. Once the Cuckoo had started laying, observation of its behaviour revealed that there were in fact nine Meadow Pipit's nests on the common. It was recognised as a "well established fact", presumably as a result of egg collecting, that in the breeding season small birds like Meadow Pipits, whose eggs had been taken or whose nests had been destroyed, would immediately begin to rebuild somewhere nearby in their territory. A period of only five days or so would elapse before a new nest was completed and by the eighth day it would contain one or two eggs, the stage at which a Cuckoo would instinctively lay into if it was her host species that she had under observation. During his investigation

Edgar Chance referred to the taking of the whole clutch of eggs to promote rebuilding as "restarting" the nest. During the laying period of the Cuckoo, a systematic "restarting" of each of the nests built and rebuilt by the nine Meadow Pipits in residence on the common was undertaken. The nests were "restarted" in rotation at two day intervals with the anticipation that only one nest at a time would be in a receptive condition for a Cuckoo to lay into. Using this method during the 1920 season Edgar Chance and his band of helpers induced Cuckoo A to lay twenty one eggs, twenty laid as predicted in the nests of the Meadow Pipits, only one egg going astray, this being laid in the nest of a Tree Pipit. This meant that some Meadow Pipits had to rebuild their nests five times. The twenty one eggs laid in the 1920 season by a single Cuckoo exceeded the record of seventeen held at the time by Dr. Eugene Rey of Leipzig, an ornithologist whom Edgar Chance seems to have held in very high regard. There had been some predation on the Meadow Pipits during the season by Kestrels but eventually all the remaining pairs of Meadow Pipits on the common were allowed to hatch their own broods which they reared successfully. During the same period Cuckoo B laid one egg in the nest of a Linnet. After some practice the method proved so accurate that by the time Cuckoo A had laid her tenth egg it was possible to predict when and in which nest she would lay next. This made it possible for Edgar Chance to provide mobile hides and to invite a number of interested observers to witness and photograph the Cuckoo laying her egg. The most significant conclusions drawn from the 1920 season, therefore, were that the female Cuckoo kept the nest of her chosen host under close observation from favourite elevated vantage points while it was being built until it was completed. At the commencement of egg laying by the owners of the nest a visual cue was provided which caused the Cuckoo to involuntarily initiate ovulation. The Cuckoo was stimulated instinctively, probably to the point of exhaustion, to lay eggs at intervals of two days, the minimum period required for the Cuckoo to produce an egg, for as long as she was confronted by host nests at the appropriate stage of development.

An observation of ornithological interest was revealed at the time by a resident of one of the cottages local to the common, who, knowing that Edgar Chance had an interest in birds, reported that his little boy had found a Wryneck's *(Jynx torquilla (L.))* nest containing ten eggs on 6th June 1920.

The 1920 season had been very successful in providing proof for Edgar Chance's theories with many visitors having witnessed for themselves the egg laying activities of the Cuckoo.

**The Fourth Season 1921**

With the approach of the 1921 season Edgar Chance decided that the success achieved in the previous season justified making a film of the operations on the common. With this in mind he entered into a contract with the Commercial and Educational Film Co. He arranged that during the Cuckoo's nesting season the services of an expert "kinematograph" operator should be placed at his disposal and put on standby to come to the common at very short notice. In order to facilitate observations and filming, during the Winter Edgar Chance commissioned the construction of half a dozen specially designed "hides" made of wickerwork covered with heather. These hides were placed about the common early in the season so that birds and animals would accept them as part of the scenery. Unfortunately in early March village boys had started serious fires on the common which ruined some of the best Meadow Pipit breeding grounds for the whole season. Consequently only six pairs of Meadow Pipits bred in the 1921 season compared with the nine pairs of the previous year.

By the end of April the burden of locating, identifying and manipulating the nests of the various Meadow Pipits was such that Edgar Chance and his band of helpers were forced to be almost in constant attendance at the common. On April 27th a male Cuckoo was heard and on April 30th a female seen. On the 12th May the first Cuckoo egg was laid on the common. To the delight of Edgar Chance when he retrieved the egg he discovered that it was identical to the forty six eggs he had collected from Cuckoo A in the three previous seasons and that she therefore had survived her migration to Africa and back yet again and had returned to the common for a fourth season. With the commencement of laying of Cuckoo A Edgar Chance telephoned to London on 13th May to notify the "kinematograph" operator he had on standby, Mr. E. Hawkins, to come to the common which he duly did arriving that evening. As before manipulation of the Meadow Pipit's made it possible to predict with a fair degree of accuracy when and in which nest Cuckoo A would deposit her next egg. Filming began with the laying of her second egg on 14th May and continued, when predictions proved to be correct, up to egg number seven laid on 26th May. At this point Mr. Hawkins returned to London to process the film so far obtained. Numerous visitors were invited to observe the Cuckoo's activities first hand and on one day eleven people were accommodated in the hides. Among the visitors invited was Mr. H. F. Witherby the publisher of a number of important books on birds. Mr. Hawkins returned in time for the laying of egg number twelve on 7th June. Edgar Chance had planned that Cuckoo A should be stimulated to lay only fifteen eggs in the 1921 season to support his theory that she would cease laying when there were no Meadow Pipit nests being built. The fifteenth egg was laid on the 13th June in the last remaining controlled nest. The remaining Meadow Pipits, on the common with clutches of eggs which were still being laid, had their clutches made up to the full complement with eggs of other Meadow Pipits brought in from a distance away. These completed clutches were allowed to hatch and as expected, with the supply of fosterers cut off, Cuckoo A ceased to lay. Edgar Chance's activities were mainly concentrated on the common at Pound Green throughout the 1920 and 1921 seasons. However on another common three miles distant a number of his friends had been recruited to manipulate the nesting birds there in order to confirm his findings with other Cuckoos. This common was densely covered with heather and had more than two dozen Meadow Pipits in residence. On alternate days when Cuckoo A was not laying at Pound Green he was able together with Mr. E. Hawkins to observe and film at the second common.

**The Cuckoo's Activities On Film**

At Pound Green Common the best film was obtained during the laying of the second, third, fourth, twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth eggs and the best approach glide of the Cuckoo to the fosterer's nest filmed prior to the laying of the seventh egg. The completed film which resulted from all this effort clearly depicted the typical behaviour of the female Cuckoo at the fosterer's nest and was subsequently shown in an edited version to a wide audience. As Edgar Chance explained in his own words;

"This film was exhibited to the members of the Zoological Society, Regent's Park, London, on Tuesday, November 8, 1921, and, by the courtesy of that Society, on the following evening to the British Ornithologists, Union. The following Wednesday (November 16) at the New Gallery Kinema, Regent Street, selections from the film, profusely interspersed with explanatory titles, were exhibited to members of the Film Trade, Press, and general public - an enthusiastic audience numbering nearly 700 people."



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This edited version is the film known as "The Cuckoo's Secret" a copy of which is held in the National Film And Television Archive.
Thus came to an end four years of intensive investigation into the behaviour and parasitic habits of the Cuckoo. Part of the incentive to carry out the work was without doubt the opportunity it provided to an ardent oologist like Edgar Chance to add a remarkable series of Cuckoo eggs to his existing collection, sixty one over the four seasons from Cuckoo A alone. It appears that in this age of abundant wild life in the British Isles, egg collecting like butterfly collecting was not regarded as a threat to their survival. Some species were protected and in April 1926 Edgar Chance was fined Thirteen Pounds Ten Shillings for unlawfully taking Crossbill eggs.
The major contributions made to ornithological knowledge by Edgar Chance's Cuckoo studies in Wyre Forest have perhaps never received the acknowledgement they deserve. They provided for the first time definitive answers to questions which until then had been open to speculation and debate and added considerably to the accumulated understanding of the Cuckoo's Behaviour. Following on the success of the film Edgar Chance published a detailed account of his investigations in his book "The Cuckoo's Secret".

**Cuckoo Behaviour Photographed In The Forest In 1978**

From Edgar Chance's work we can appreciate how common the Cuckoo was in the years of his study. Cuckoos still return to the forest each year but sadly by the beginning of the twenty first century in ever decreasing numbers. In part of my study area some mile or so South of Pound Green Common Cuckoos parasitise Tree Pipits in some years. The type of habitat chosen by this ground nesting species and the extremely cautious nature of the Tree Pipit makes its nest one of the most difficult to find. The Tree Pipit approaches its nest stealthily along the ground where the evolutionary adaptations of long sturdy legs and extended hind toe and claw have, compared with most passerines, endowed it with an enhanced ability for walking. From the landing some yards away, the route taken to the nest is nearly always circuitous and only rarely direct. Invisible from above the Tree Pipits push their way through the plants of the herb layer for all the world like miniature explorers pushing their way through a dense jungle. The walk is accompanied by piping calls repeated every second or so to maintain contact between the male and female Pipit all the time they are out of sight of each other.

On the afternoon of June 21st 1978 I was using my car as a hide to study a pair of Great Spotted Woodpeckers that were nesting in Longdon Orchard. At about 4.00 p.m., the movement of a large bird some distance away drew my attention and I observed a Cuckoo making a long glide down to the ground from a high vantage point in an oak tree. Some thirty seconds or so later the Cuckoo rose from the ground and flew rapidly away. Edgar Chance had described this purposeful "glide" in detail and I felt sure that, as the time of day was in agreement with his observations, I had witnessed the laying of one of the Cuckoos eggs. I noted the point from which the Cuckoo had flown up as accurately as I could from where I was situated. When I had completed my work with the woodpeckers I moved my vehicle as near as I could to where the Cuckoo had flown up and leaving the cover of my vehicle walked carefully to that point.
There were no agitated birds in evidence as I approached which would have indicated a nest nearby and after a diligent search of the area I failed to locate any nest. The ground cover was quite dense in places and I realised that if there was a nest there I was likely to damage it by trampling on it before I would find it. At this point I began to wonder if the Cuckoo's glide had been a false alarm.
From my previous survey of this compartment of the wood I was fairly certain that the only birds nesting on the ground in this particular area were Woodwarblers and Tree Pipits.
Pinpointing a nest, when only the approximate location is known, is rarely simple. With a knowledge of the bird's nesting requirements one can search every likely nest site in the area. Alternatively the sitting bird can sometimes be flushed from the nest and then watched as it returns. In practice the first method is time consuming and tends to draw the attention of predators to the site. The second method is not as easy as it sounds especially if, as I suspected, the Cuckoo's victim might be a Tree Pipit. As already described the Tree Pipits approach to the nest is very cautious and the birds are usually hidden from view by the ground cover. In addition, when disturbed the Tree Pipit leaves its nest in an equally stealthy manner often when the intruder is still some way off. Although rather time consuming the surest method of locating Tree Pipit nests in my experience has been to erect a hide in the area and then listen to the birds returning to the nest. Although they may be out of sight the noise they make walking over dead leaves and pushing their way through the herbage gives away their position. The nest area is reached when the noise ceases suddenly and if hatched the young can be heard begging for food. Alternatively

if the bird is incubating the noise ceases suddenly and a period of quiet follows as it settles down on the eggs. Once the approximate locality of the nest is known the position of the hide can be adjusted until the nest site is pinpointed. Having caused sufficient disturbance in the area I resolved to return equipped with a suitable hide. The following day I returned to the vicinity but before assembling my hide I walked purposefully from the ride towards the area where, I expected to find the nest, hoping to see a bird rise ahead of me to indicate approximately where to start my search. I had almost reached the point where I thought the Cuckoo had landed the previous day when to my surprise and satisfaction a Tree Pipit rose directly from a nest only three feet from me. The nest which was very well concealed among the ground vegetation was positioned between two tussocks of grass growing close together. It contained three eggs two belonging to the Tree Pipit which were a warm stone colour with dark purple brown freckles and the Cuckoos egg, larger and browner but with similar freckles. The Cuckoo's egg was in fact a reasonable match in colour with those of the Tree Pipit which in any case are usually very variable. I suspected that as she had been sitting on an incomplete clutch that the Tree Pipit had probably just laid one of her eggs. As Cuckoo's eggs are not much larger then those of the song thrush they are relatively small compared with the considerable size of the bird. Despite having found several before there is still a certain thrill in discovering a Cuckoo's egg in another birds nest. I made a careful note of the exact location of the nest with respect to three nearby trees which I marked inconspicuously with a black felt tipped pen. I left the nest area and watched from a distance to make sure that the Tree Pipit returned. Within a minute it had flown into the lower branches of one of the trees I had marked and after looking around for a further minute it dropped to the ground a few yards from its nest. Making an allowance for the Tree Pipit to complete its clutch of normally five eggs, the Cuckoo having taken one, I estimated that a further two days would elapse before incubation would commence on the 24th June. This would mean that if the nest was not predated the eggs would hatch about twelve days later around the 4th July. The chances of survival of a brood in an individual nest in the natural woodland with its full complement of predators, both winged and four footed, is not very high. However on average I have found that the Tree Pipit, having a cautious nature, stands a better chance of rearing a brood to maturity than many other woodland species providing that the natural enemy of ground nesting birds, heavy rain followed by cold, does not intervene. I returned to the site on the 5th July with the expectation that I would be able to locate the nest without difficulty having first made sure as before that I was unobserved by predators, the human variety at least. I was greatly encouraged when I saw a Tree Pipit rise from the nest area in its usual cautious manner when I was still ten yards distant. It flew to a nearby tree giving its repetitive chirping alarm call which brought the other parent bird to join it. The pair were clearly agitated and obviously had young to rear. I quickly located the nest and found two recently hatched Tree Pipits still alive on the ground outside the nest. Inside the security of the nest cup lay the hatchling Cuckoo. It was blind and naked but its skin was turning from the dark pink it would have been on hatching to black which meant that it must have been at least two days old. The Tree Pipits had obviously not completed their clutch after being raided by the Cuckoo and incubation must have commenced on the day that I found them. I left the area quickly and when I was perhaps thirty yards from the nest, and still in full view, saw both Tree Pipits drop to the ground. I visited the site again while I was passing the following day and found the young Cuckoo flourishing and now almost black but the young Tree Pipits, of course, dead. Freshly hatched Cuckoos are surprisingly large considering the size of the egg from which they have emerged. They are squat ugly little creatures with long oar like wings and once recovered from the exertions of hatching from the thick shelled egg are strong and active. Although blind they are intolerant of anything sharing the nest with them and manoeuvre the object, egg or hatchling, into a special hollow in their back and then using their primitive wings outspread to stabilise themselves they clamber backwards up the side of the nest cup and eject the offending object well out of the nest. Watching this procedure, which is often repeated several times at a nest if there are several objects to be ejected, is one of the one of the most remarkable sights in nature.

**The Dedication Of The Cuckoo's Foster Parents**

So far so good, the Cuckoo had survived to the hatchling stage would it survive to fledging? I returned to the nest site again on the 16th July only to find the scene drastically changed. The majority of the trees including the three which I had marked had been felled, cut up and removed and during these operations much of the ground flora had been severely disturbed. Survival of the nest in these circumstances seemed impossible for the forest workers, having no knowledge of the presence of the nest, would have taken no precautions to protect it. There seemed at first little chance that the nest would have remained unharmed but I was heartened by the fact that a pair of Tree Pipits were giving alarm calls nearby. An instant later, still chirping their alarm calls, the two Tree Pipits



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alighted on the top twigs of the pile of branches left over from the felled trees and both were carrying food in their bills. A few yards away I heard the unmistakeable subdued trilling of a hungry young Cuckoo. It had survived but it had narrowly escaped being crushed. Despite the major upheaval and the presence of several forest workers around the nest the Tree Pipits had not deserted their charge and this demonstrates how strong the attachment is between the fosterers and the young Cuckoo. In the chaotic conditions of the disturbed ground I experienced some difficulty in locating the nest but when I found it, there was the young Cuckoo thriving and filling it to overflowing. The trunk of one of the felled trees had fallen just a foot from the nest and a pile of chain saw chips showed that one of the cuts made when it had been sawn into lengths was actually inches behind it. A number of small branches and a quantity of leaves had fallen across the nest between the tussocks of grass almost trapping the young Cuckoo, which was by now of course a large well feathered bird.

I carefully cleared away the branches and leaves from the nest site, the young Cuckoo reacting typically as I carried out the task, as will be explained later. I returned to the forest very early on the morning of the 19th July equipped with a hide and ready to prepare the site for some photography of the Cuckoo now that it was well grown.

I checked that the Cuckoo was still thriving then left the immediate area and erected my photographic hide thirty yards from the nest. Concealed inside the hide I watched to make sure that the Tree Pipits continued to feed the Cuckoo. Over a period of time I gradually moved the hide yard by yard nearer to the nest until it was nine feet away. Throughout this operation the Tree Pipits continued to feed the Cuckoo quite unconcerned. I think in this case that the recent felling operations by the nest had partially conditioned the Pipits to accept humans near the nest. With shyer subjects bringing a hide up to the nest might take days. Now that the hide was in position, at the correct distance from the nest and had been accepted by the Pipits the camera and flash leads could be introduced ready for taking photographs. With the reflex camera and telephoto lens focused on the nest I had my first really close view of the Pipits feeding the young Cuckoo which proved to be a incredible sight.

One task remained, some "gardening" around the nest, in other words the temporary tying back of foliage interfering with a clear view of the nest. In this case three or four long straggling grass stems were all that needed to be moved.

During the next absence of the Pipits I left the hide and cautiously approached the young Cuckoo. I have found that from an early age young Cuckoos are very aggressive in the nest. As I approached it opened its bill wide displaying the enormous crimson gape and hissed loudly like a snake. Many young birds especially ground nesters like Tree Pipits and Woodwarblers make this noise as a defence mechanism but of course not as loud as the Cuckoo.

As I gently put my hand down to the nest to bend back the offending grass stems the young Cuckoo brought its second line of defence into play. It retreated back into the nest as far as its size would still allow, and hissing, it puffed up its feathers making it appear twice its actual size. Then suddenly without warning it launched itself forward like a jack in the box viciously pecking my hand but leaving its tail inside the nest. It repeated this action until my hand was out of reach. Such violent behaviour must aid survival considerably as I am sure some ground predators would be deterred by this display.

With the "gardening" completed I was able to return to the concealment of the hide for the rest of the day. During this time I took a successful series of photographs of the Tree Pipits feeding the Cuckoo.

As I had observed earlier the Tree Pipits piped to each other as they approached the nest along the ground in their usual cautious manner. As soon as either of the Pipits was sighted the Cuckoo became very excited. It lay on its side with its upper wing raised and quivering showing the pale axillary feathers. With its bill open wide displaying to the Pipits the irresistible feeding stimulus of the crimson gape, it trilled continuously until the food they were carrying had been pushed down its throat. When the young Cuckoo saw no more food being presented it turned and pecked viciously at the breast of the Pipit as if to say "go and get some more and hurry up." A varied diet was brought to the nest including spiders, harvestmen, large and small larvae of various colours and several species of moths including a large number of Yellow Underwings. Faecal sacs were produced every two or three feeds and were carried away by the Pipits.

I returned to the nest for a second photographic session with the Cuckoo on the 22nd July. Now near to fledging it was fully feathered but still had the short tail of a nestling Cuckoo though it had gained in confidence and mobility. In between feeds it exercised its bright yellow feet and legs by making short waddling journeys for a few feet round the back of the nest. It then flew back to perch on the top of the nest from where it could see

the Pipits returning from a long way off, trilling loudly and impatiently as soon as they approached. The young Cuckoo left the nest when it was twenty one days old and gradually made its way up into the nearby trees from where it could still be heard trilling for food on the 30th July. That was my last contact with this Cuckoo.

I feel sure that having survived the near disaster during its early life in the nest that eventually, like its true parents before it, this Cuckoo migrated back to Africa, hopefully to return to the forest to breed the following year. Spring would not be complete in Wyre without the evocative call of the Cuckoo echoing through the woods.

Neville Wilde

***Before the truth was revealed it was thought that Cuckoos placed their eggs in the domed nests of birds like Wrens with their beaks.***



This article is an extract from the Wyre Forest Study Group annual Review 2001