
A FIRST BREEDING RECORD OF THE CUCKOO FALCON IN KENYA

By

L. H. BROWN AND G. BURSELL

The Cuckoo Falcon, *Aviceda cuculoides* Swainson, is an uncommon, elusive, and little-known bird of prey which has never been thoroughly studied at the nest. Scanty West African observations indicate that it performs a vigorous tumbling and diving display, accompanied by calling and the exhibition of the chestnut underwing coverts; that the nest is probably built afresh annually; and that the incubation period was in one case about 33 days though, as the nest in question failed, this was not certain (J. H. Elgood, pers. comm., Brown & Amadon; in Press).

These observations accord with what is known of other members of this genus, which is commonest in India, Indonesia and Australia (3 species) and also occurs in Madagascar (1 species). The genus appears to be largely or entirely insectivorous and, perhaps for this reason, has the lores covered, resembling in this respect the Honey Buzzard *Pernis apivorus* (Linnaeus), which seems more closely related to *Aviceda* than any other Old World species of bird of prey.

There appear to be no breeding records of the Cuckoo Falcon in East Africa. None are listed by Mackworth Praed & Grant (1952), Jackson & Sclater (1938) or other standard works, and there are no eggs in the National Museum. When, therefore, the haunt of a pair was discovered in 1966 it was kept under observation in the hope of being able to record the breeding cycle. This proved impossible, but definite evidence of breeding was obtained.

The site was in a small relict patch of forest in a valley on a steep hill slope, surrounded by *Combretum-Hyparrhenia* savanna, at about 5,800 ft. alt. The pair had been seen by us in this area earlier, but no signs of breeding detected. On 8.1.67 G.B. observed a Cuckoo Falcon perched in the centre of the forest, with food in its beak. It flew to a dead branch of an *Albizia gummifera* (J. F. Gmel) C.A. Sm. growing at the lower end of the patch of forest. There it was joined by another, also with food in the beak. One bird disappeared into the dense part of the tree, reappeared without food, and flew away. The other remained on the branch, and since it appeared to be unwilling to go to the probable nest the area was then left undisturbed.

No nest was discovered on 22.1, though Cuckoo Falcons were seen and heard. On 12.2 a flimsy nest was found right in the leafy crown of the tree, perhaps 18 inches in diameter, and apparently made of vines, now dried. It was empty, but it is possible that the young had already left. Alternatively, breeding may have been a failure in 1966.

In late 1967 the nest site was kept under observation in the hope of watching the whole breeding cycle. No Cuckoo Falcons were seen until 4.11, when the female

(noticeably browner than the male) was seen flying to a dead branch near the nest, the same branch on which the pair had perched with food in January. She then went to the nest and the male, who had evidently been perched nearby, came to collect small green branches from a *Croton megalocarpus* Hutch. growing close to our observation point. We thus had a grandstand view of his building procedure.

Between 10.25 and 10.59 hrs. he collected eight green twigs in rapid succession. In each case his procedure was nearly identical. He flew from the nest and settled about the middle of, or low down in, the *Croton* (or in other *Crotons* nearby). He would then peer about, looking upwards and sideways, cocking his head this way and that, until he had selected a suitable twig. He would then fly *up* to it, seize it in his feet and, hanging upside down, reach up with his beak and snip off the twig. As he fell away with the twig in his grasp he righted himself dexterously and flew to the dead branch near the nest. Here he transferred the green twig from feet to beak before making the final flight to the nest itself. The only variation in this procedure was when on one occasion he sidled along a branch like a parrot and snipped off a spray without flying up to it.

The male left the area of his own volition at 10.59, soaring away overhead. He was not disturbed by us. When he had gone we went to look at the nest, where we found the female building in the structure used in the previous year. She had been incorporating the green twigs into the edge of the structure and evidently building had begun some days before as there were other twigs with dry leaves on the edge of the nest. The nest was a very slight frail structure, now appearing not more than 9–10" across, and without the green leaves in its lining would have been transparent. The head and tail of the female projected well over the edge. Nevertheless it was the same structure as used the year before, showing that on occasions Cuckoo Falcons use the same nest for more than one year.

At 12.35 the female was still on the nest. At 12.45 the male returned and recommenced building, bringing new twigs at 12.50, 12.52 and 12.56. On this occasion we watched the nest itself. The female remained there the whole time while the male fetched the material. The male arrived with each twig, all *Croton*, carried in his beak, as before, placed each on the edge of the structure, and worked it partly into place before leaving. The female then picked up the new twig and readjusted it more securely, in another place. When both birds were on the nest together they more than filled it. They uttered soft somewhat explosive whistling calls "*Pititiu, pititiu*", inaudible except at close range. The female turned round and round in the nest and remained there when the male again soared away at 12.58. Clearly she had not yet laid and was not incubating.

On 12.11 the female was found incubating by G.B., at 07.30–08.30 hrs. facing up valley. The whole of her tail and vent protruded over the nest edge. On 22.11 the female was incubating from 10.25–12.45; a fresh green branch had been added. The incubating female changed position at 10.50 and at 11.00 turned the eggs; at 11.15 she ate a small scrap of food lying on the nest. The male was not seen. From

these observations it seems likely that only the female incubates and that she is fed on the nest by the male, though longer periods of watching are needed to prove the point.

On 5.12, by which time we hoped the eggs would be near hatching, no adults were observed between 08.50 and 12.30. Evidently some mishap had occurred, and the pair had failed, perhaps for the second year in succession. Nevertheless these records establish the fact that attempts to breed were made, and that in this case the breeding season was in November-December, in the height of the more reliable of two annual rainfall seasons in the area concerned. Breeding during the rains, although unusual in raptors as a whole, would be quite appropriate in this insectivorous species.

The Cuckoo Falcon has "teeth" or indentations in the upper mandible which, in the Falconiformes, are only possessed by *Aviceda*, the South American genus *Harpagus*, and the true falcons of the genus *Falco*. In the highly predatory *Falco* the teeth are used to break the necks of large avian or mammalian prey. The possession of "teeth" superficially similar to those of *Falco* is presumably the reason for the vernacular name "Cuckoo Falcon", which is most inappropriate for an inoffensive insectivorous bird which resembles the highly predatory falcons in scarcely any other respect. It may be that such "teeth" are needed to cut or break up the larger insects; but they are not possessed by most insectivorous birds, such as flycatchers. The neat manner in which the male used his beak to snip off green sprays of *Croton* which, for a human being, would require quite a powerful wrench or twist to remove, at least suggests that the "teeth" of *Aviceda* may be used to cut off building material. More observations are, of course, needed to show that this is a regular habit in *A. cuculoides* and in the genus *Aviceda* as a whole.

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(Received 22nd January 1968)