



Featured Bird Series

Fan-tailed Cuckoo *Cacomantis flabelliformis*

Description

A medium-sized bird with a short curved bill, yellow eye ring, grey-blue head and back, and rufous breast. Its tail is long (125-150mm) and barred on the underside. The palate (the inside of the mouth) is orange, and this feature is conspicuous when the bird is calling. Males and females differ only in their ventral colouring. Males have a rufous-brown breast grading to light rufous-brown on the belly, flanks and undertail coverts. Females have a light rufous-brown upper breast while their lower breast, belly and flanks are off-white and finely barred with grey.

Juvenile birds initially have a distinctive brown mottled plumage. At around 3 months of age they moult into an adult-like plumage but immature birds retain juvenile secondaries which are dark brown with light brown to off-white fringes. The moult to full adult plumage starts at approximately one year old.

Brush Cuckoos are sometimes mis-identified as Fan-tailed Cuckoos (and vice versa). The presence or absence of a yellow eye ring is a crucial field characteristic as is the overall duller colour of the Brush Cuckoo and the shape of the tail (they have a square-tipped tail, not rounded as with the Fan-tailed Cuckoo).



Female Fan-tailed Cuckoo (photo Steve Merrett)

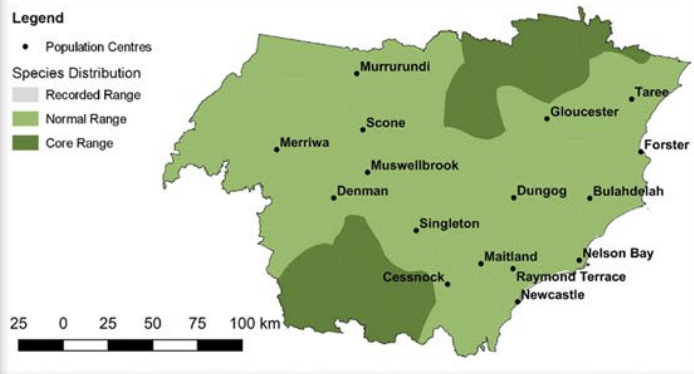
Regional Status

The Fan-tailed Cuckoo is considered a resident of our region, unlike all our other cuckoo species which only visit here for part of the year. It is widely distributed (see map) and may be found in any well-wooded area, at any altitude.

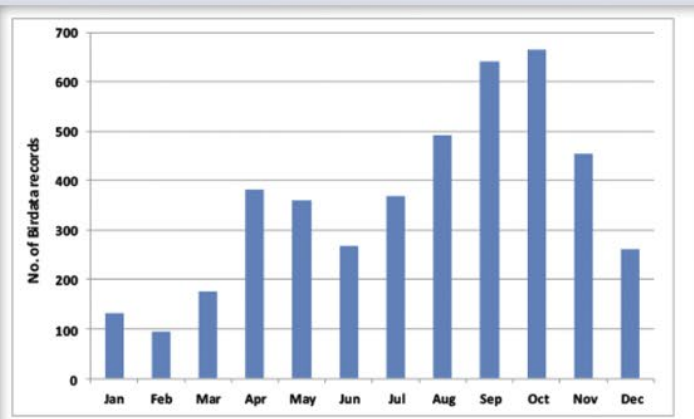
The local population is stable or perhaps has slightly declined.

Although birds are recorded all year, the reporting rate drops in summer because they call less often then and hence can be overlooked. See graph of monthly Birdata records (the dip in June is perhaps because fewer people are out looking).

Many Fan-tailed Cuckoos leave southern Australia in autumn and winter. There is no evidence that any of them come to our region but that possibility cannot be excluded.



Distribution of the Fan-tailed Cuckoo in the Hunter Region (map prepared by Dan Williams).



Monthly records for the Hunter Region from Birdata



Juvenile Fan-tailed Cuckoo (photo Stephanie Owen)

Breeding host species

Most cuckoo species are brood parasites, laying their eggs in the nest of another species (the "host species"). The battle of wits between cuckoos and hosts is very fascinating. HANZAB mentions about 50 known breeding host species for Fan-tailed Cuckoos, but with scrubwrens, thornbills and fairy-wrens accounting for over 80% of the records. Most of our local reports have involved White-browed Scrubwren or Brown Thornbill hosts. Other confirmed local hosts are Large-billed Scrubwren, Golden Whistler and Yellow-faced Honeyeater (all are mentioned in HANZAB) and Flame Robin (HANZAB mentions related species eg Scarlet Robin). Almost certainly, there are other local host species.

Sub-species

The Fan-tailed Cuckoo also occurs in New Guinea and several Pacific islands. Across the entire range there are five sub-species. However, only the nominate sub-species *flabelliformis* occurs in Australia.



Male Fan-tailed Cuckoo (photo Ray Burton)

About the name

Fan-tailed Cuckoo

Cuckoo is onomatopoeic – it's the call made by the European member of the family (and by no other family members!). The use of Fan-tailed for the species name is mystifying, as there is nothing particularly fan-like about the tail or how the bird uses it. The name was chosen based upon a museum specimen and a bit of imagination.

Cacomantis flabelliformis

Cacomantis means "prophet of evil" and derives from two Greek words *kakos* (evil) and *mantis* (seer or prophet). This probably alludes to the association made by many people of cuckoo species and bad weather. The species name *flabelliformis* describes the bird's alleged tail, from the Latin words *flabellum* (small fan or whisk) and *formus* (shape).

Design: Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters Text by Alan Stuart based on information sourced from:
• HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series; • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds); • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series);
• Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide. • Richard Schodde and Ian Mason (1998). A Directory of Australian Birds (Passerines).

Information in this fact sheet is provided exclusively to members of the Hunter Bird Observers Club



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