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The Cuckoo's ability to find a nest where it can lay an egg

JUSSI SEPPÄ (†)

Introduction. Little seems to be known about the method adopted by the female Cuckoo in searching for the host's nest. The only more recent observations known to me are LÖHRL's (*Ornithol. Berichte* 1950) thorough observations on Cuckoos parasitizing on Meadow-pipits.

In the popular Finnish journal "Luonnon Ystävä" (1930, 34:66—67) there is, however, an old record of the strategy of the female Cuckoo. The author, JUSSI SEPPÄ (1885—1951) was a well-known ornithologist and high-school teacher in biology. Being written in Finnish without even a summary, his pioneer record on the Cuckoo has remained unknown. In order to make it more widely available, *Ornis Fennica* brings a translation of SEPPÄ's original paper.

Both SEPPÄ and LÖHRL agree in that the female Cuckoo neither searches at random nor (as has sometimes been claimed) watches the host build, but uses the same method as a child searching for a hidden sweet, when his parents guide him by saying "warmer" or "hot" every time he approaches the goal. The same method, according to LÖHRL, is used by the Jay in finding the eggs of small passerine birds. — LARS VON HAARTMAN

In the summer 1928, whilst walking in a field, I observed a pair of Whinchats who were obviously disturbed through no obvious reason. I myself was at the time about 50 meter away so they were not frightened by me. Being full of curiosity I took up position in a suitable hiding-place, soon a Cuckoo appeared from the nearby forest and flew straight towards the bushes in which the Whinchats were, only to be chased away by them. The Cuckoo returned many times, each time the Whinchats screaming "gee gee" chased it to the forest edge where it remained a while. From there, however, I could hear a similar "gee gee" sound and soon the Cuckoo appeared again in the field being chased by Willow Warblers. As soon as the Whinchats sighted the Cuckoo they flew towards it and chased it again into the forest. I had never before witnessed such a performance in nature.

Observing the Cuckoo flying in the field I had noticed that it each time flew closer to a certain small bush, and that this particularly upset the Whinchats. Unfortunately I did not have time to continue observing this very interesting situation. I, however, decided to inspect this small bush. As I expected at the base, hidden deeply in the ground, was the Whinchats' nest containing three eggs. The Cuckoo had apparently discovered the nest with the obvious inten-

tion of laying an egg there. Why would it otherwise have disturbed the Whinchats so intensively? Unfortunately I did not have the opportunity to find out if it succeeded.

Before leaving I decided to investigate why the Willow Warblers were so angry with the Cuckoo. I walked quietly to the forest and there, led by the Warblers and the Cuckoo, I easily found the Willow Warblers' nest. One can presume that the Cuckoo was going to lay soon as it was so anxious to find a nest.

After this incident I always remember the warning sound of the birds (the same for both species). This sound has later several times informed me that a Cuckoo is looking for a nest. To my amazement the sound has always been this same "gee gee". It seems as if birds use the same warning sound when protecting their nests against the Cuckoo.

From the above it becomes clear that the Cuckoo does not randomly look for a nest into which to lay its egg but finds out which part of their territory the birds guard best and thus where the nests are.

Selostus: Käen kyvystä löytää muiden lintujen pesä.

Kirjoitus on käännös Jussi Sepän (†) Luonnon Ystävässä 1930 (34: 66—67) julkaistusta tiedonannosta.