

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher, Jim Butler

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CUCKOO'S LIFECYCLE HAS BIG ISSUES



The adult Eastern Koel is a brood parasite, never needing to make a nest or incubate eggs because it uses Magpie-larks to raise its chicks. However, the Koel chicks, reared by Magpie-larks, have complex developmental hurdles to overcome. Firstly, the Koel chick must entice the Magpie-larks to feed it! As an initial strategy, the cuckoo chick ejects any host eggs or chicks from the nest. Secondly, the cuckoo chick's gaping mouth has evolved so that it looks exactly like the host chick's mouth. A further trick is to mimic the begging call of the host bird's chick. With these tricks the cuckoo chick can ensure it is well fed by the host.

Two other problems for the Koel chick are that it must learn to mate with the Koel species in adulthood and lay its eggs in Magpie-lark nests. Most birds learn while they

are chicks that it is the species tending the nest which they will mate with in adulthood (think Movie - *Fly Away Home!*). The Koel chick must avoid learning that the Magpie-lark is their future mate; but must imprint that the Magpie-lark is the host for its chicks. How the Koel chick achieves these imprinting feats is not clear. But it happens because once the Koel chick is fledged it joins the Autumn migration to the north and returns in Spring to mate with a Koel and lay eggs in the nest of the Magpie-lark. One explanation is that the loud Koel calls of the true parents that remain near the host nest are sufficient to imprint on the chick to mate with Koels which ensures the survival of the species.

Happy Birding!

– Jim

Image: Magpie Lark by Mike Ford ©