

## REVIEW

**Davies, N.B., 2000: Cuckoos, cowbirds and other cheats.**

*Academic Press, London. ISBN 0-85661-135-2.*

This book fills the important and long-standing gap between primary literature on parasite-host coevolution (which is hardly accessible to a lay audience) and publications for laypersons interested in the subject. The only available book also suitable for non-professionals is W y l l i e ' s "The Cuckoo" (1981). However, the majority of relevant studies on brood parasitism have been published after 1985, moreover, W y l l i e dedicated his book solely to the common cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*). On one hand, this is admittedly the best studied brood parasite (together with its North American counterpart, the brown-headed cowbird *Molothrus ater*), but on the other it is just one of almost one hundred species that do not build their own nests and lay their eggs in those of other species.

N. B. D a v i e s is one of the leading authorities on brood parasite evolution and during the last fifteen years has published many ground-breaking and widely cited studies (especially D a v i e s & B r o o k e 1988, 1989). In the introductory pages to "Cuckoos, cowbirds and other cheats" he traces the major landmarks in the history of cuckoo and other parasite research – from the first mention of their strange habits in the works of A r i s t o t l e through to the pioneering work of E. C h a n c e to researchers currently working on the subject, especially in Australia, Britain, Canada, Japan, Norway, Spain and USA (in alphabetical order). Each of the following chapters focuses on a distinct parasitic group: the common cuckoo, African and Australian bronze-cuckoos (*Chrysococcyx* spp.), non-evicting cuckoos (*Clamator*, *Scythrops*, *Eudynamys*), the brown-headed cowbird, neotropical shiny and screaming cowbirds (*M. bonariensis* and *rufoaxillaris*) and African parasitic finches (Viduinæ).

D a v i e s ' book is more up-to-date than an important monograph edited by R o t h s t e i n & R o b i n s o n (1998). Although the latter book was published such a short time ago, a mere two years difference means a lot in host-parasite coevolution studies. The continuing avalanche of both empirical and theoretical studies has brought several important findings which are not included in R o t h s t e i n & R o b i n s o n (1998) but which were incorporated into D a v i e s ' book, e.g. T e u s c h l et al.'s (1998) study on habitat imprinting or K i l n e r et al.'s (1999) exciting pioneering work which unravelled the peculiarities of the parent-offspring communication system between reed warbler hosts and the cuckoo nestling.

Author set a high standard with his previous book on "Dunnock behaviour and social evolution" (Oxford University Press, 1992), not to mention his excellent textbooks co-authored with J. R. K r e b s ("An introduction to behavioural ecology" and "Behavioural ecology. An evolutionary approach"). The new book on brood parasitism is again of high quality and greatly fulfils expectations. I found the book very informative, thought-provoking and enjoyable. I also appreciate its balanced contents – there is no noticeable species or issue bias and even less well known parasitic systems and unpublished data gained access to the book. Facing the outburst of "parasitic" publications in recent years, it was surely not an easy task to write the book in so balanced and readable a form. Another advantage is the meticulously complete bibliography which also contains old, obscure and almost forgotten literary sources. Finally, every reader will benefit from the colour plates showing excellent examples of both egg and chick mimicry and several adult and young parasitic birds.

The book is primarily written for a wider general audience, but I think it also serves as an excellent introductory text on the problems of parasite-host interactions for (behavioural) scientists not actively working in the subject. General readers will also find a lot of interesting information on (co)evolutionary issues. Finally, cuckoo and other cheats researchers will find D a v i e s ' review helpful, stimulating and inspiring – they will not be distracted by technical data (statistical tests etc.) which should enable them to better grasp the wider context and connections among the results of different studies. To achieve this is much easier with D a v i e s ' book at hand than with piles of primary literature. The general reader, after reading D a v i e s ' book, can proceed to the monograph edited by R o t h s t e i n & R o b i n s o n (1998) which provides detailed data on particular host-parasite associations and theoretical models accounting for the observed patterns of host-parasite coevolution.

The text of "Cuckoos, cowbirds and other cheats" is full of questions that call attention to the problems currently motivating research activities. Although the book is a rich source of information, it not only gives the impression of how much new information on host-parasite co-evolution has been obtained (especially during the last two decades), but it also shows how many questions still beg to be answered.

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