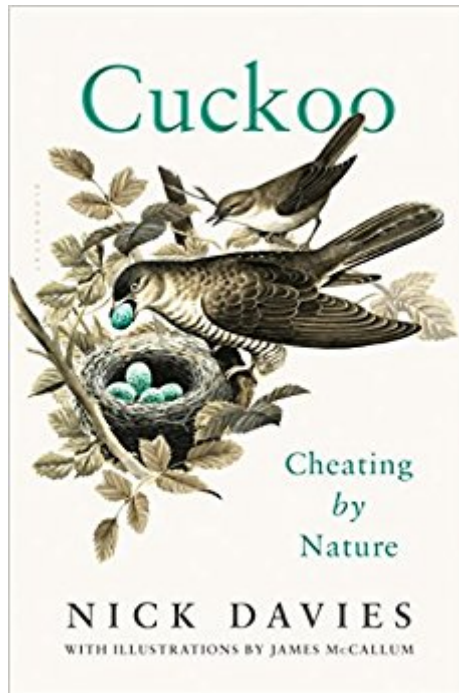




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# Cuckoo: Cheating By Nature



## Synopsis

The familiar call of the common cuckoo, "cuck-oo," has been a harbinger of spring ever since our ancestors walked out of Africa many thousands of years ago. However, for naturalist and scientist Nick Davies, the call is an invitation to solve an enduring puzzle: how does the cuckoo get away with laying its eggs in the nests of other birds and tricking them into raising young cuckoos rather than their own offspring? Early observers who noticed a little warbler feeding a monstrously large cuckoo chick concluded the cuckoo's lack of parental care was the result of faulty design by the Creator, and that the hosts chose to help the poor cuckoo. These quaint views of bad design and benevolence were banished after Charles Darwin proposed that the cuckoo tricks the hosts in an evolutionary battle, where hosts evolve better defenses against cuckoos and cuckoos, in turn, evolve better trickery to outwit the hosts. For the last three decades, Davies has employed observation and field experiments to unravel the details of this evolutionary arms race between cuckoos and their hosts. Like a detective, Davies and his colleagues studied adult cuckoo behavior, cuckoo egg markings, and cuckoo chick begging calls to discover exactly how cuckoos trick their hosts. For birding and evolution aficionados, *Cuckoo* is a lyrical and scientifically satisfying exploration of one of nature's most astonishing and beautiful adaptations.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"This amazing detective story by one of the country's greatest field naturalists is also a fascinating study that solves many of the puzzles surrounding this most extraordinary

bird. *David Attenborough* "My hope is that this reads like a nature detective story,' writes Davies. He has achieved his goal and more in this fascinating study of 'an evolutionary arms race. *Kirkus Reviews* "This is highly literate, beautifully written natural history--where the big ideas presented (e.g., evolution, natural selection) will engage amateur and expert readers alike. *Library Journal* "Not only an absorbing account of a remarkable species but a love song to field biologists, that vanishing breed of scientists who, like the birds, do their work out of doors and connect our technological present to our earthbound past. *The Wall Street Journal* "For birding and evolution aficionados, Cuckoo is a lyrical and scientifically satisfying exploration of one of nature's most astonishing and beautiful adaptations. *Bird Booker Report* "Nick Davies, after three decades of studying cuckoos, brings us the answers in an understandable fashion. *The Washington Herald*

Nick Davies is Professor of Behavioral Ecology at the University of Cambridge, a Fellow of the Royal Society, and his awards include the 2005 Elliot Coues Medal of the American Ornithologists' Union. His book *Cuckoos, Cowbirds and Other Cheats* won the Best Book of the Year Award from the British Trust for Ornithology and *British Birds* magazine. Davies lives in Cambridge, England.

This is a truly fabulous book that reveals the intricate co-evolution of the parasitic cuckoo and their hosts. Nick Davies has spent 30 years sitting patiently and watching the behavior of both cuckoos and reed warblers on Wicken Fen, a marsh nature reserve north of Cambridge, and then undertaken beautifully designed experiments to reveal the complex and fascinating biology of these and other species. The best defense by the host is to recognize when a cuckoo may try and lay her egg in their nest, then to recognize and reject the egg. Nick has made hundreds of artificial eggs to mimic the eggs of different bird species with different patterns on them that he then slips into the nests to observe when the host rejects and what the cuckoo can get away with. You start to realize the level of biology that is involved and appreciate that most birds eggs with their bright colors and complex squiggles and designed to stop parasitism rather than for camouflage. He asks perceptive questions and answers them with these neat field experiments (no birds were harmed) that reveal so much about the behavior of birds that everyone with a passing interest in birds or natural history will find this book a delight. I have bought several copies and passed to friends who have all been as enthusiastic as me. This is without doubt one of the most readable and enjoyable natural history books I have ever read - and I have several rooms full of natural history books.

A nicely written book. Three reasons: \* writing is easy to follow for a tale that lays out the science of evolution as we can see it around us \* lots of insights into cuckoos and birds. Not just in Europe but also in Africa, Australia and the New World. I am interested in birds so I particularly enjoyed the book \* the best part is the insight into the scientific process. Through each chapter Ned Davies poses a question and assembles/conducts experiments that prove or disprove a hypothesis. This leads to the next question. So one gets to watch over the shoulder of a scientist at work for decades on a topic. Even if the reader doesn't care for birds, this is an insightful book into the scientific process.

The "Cuckoo" was a very fascinating and factual book about the life cycle of the Common Cuckoo. It is also a book about ecology and the environmental influences. Sadly, this bird is declining, probably due to environmental causes. The Common Cuckoo has an intimate relationship with the host species whose nest it parasitises. It is amazing to learn how the Common Cuckoo stalks its host and finds the right moment to visit the nest and lay its egg. It removes one egg of the host and eats it. The author has spent years quietly observing this species. He has worked with other scientists in the field and laboratory.

A terrific book for lovers of natural history, animal behavior, evolutionary biology and as an illustration of how scientists proceed (or at least should proceed). Not jargonish at all; written at a level that most can understand and enjoy. Highly recommended.

Very interesting. I must admit I approached it expecting it to be informative but dull; I was pleasantly surprised.

This book is, of course, about cuckoos and the author's observation of them for decades. Unfortunately, the majority of the book is about various tests, experiments, etc. designed to determine how the cuckoo gets away with parasitizing other birds, i.e., how it succeeds in laying its eggs in other birds' nests and how the victim birds raise its fledglings. After awhile, that treatment and topic gets pretty boring, unless you are either a devoted cuckoo fan or a scientist or ornithologist, none of which is me. The last few chapters in the book, however, saved it from getting an even lower rating. They were interesting, because the author finally started talking about cuckoos in a more general sense and about himself. Those chapters were interesting and well written, and,

like I said, saved the book for me.

Very readable, fascinating.

Fascinating book and so well written.

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