

THE *Case* OF THE BEIJING CUCKOO

The cuckoo may be one of the world's most widespread birds, but we still have much to learn about its ways. Birder **Terry Townshend** has been shedding new light on the mysterious migration of Beijing's cuckoos – and winning new wildlife fans in the process

BIRDER AND WILDLIFE
CHAMPION TERRY OUT
IN THE FIELD IN CHINA

Best known for avoiding parental responsibilities by laying its eggs in other birds' nests, the cuckoo isn't necessarily the first species we think of when it comes to endurance. But a project led by Terry Townshend, a British birder based in China, has revealed just how remarkable these birds really are.

Common cuckoos are an extremely widespread species, found right across Europe and Asia, as well as in Africa, and many are migratory. Research by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) has already revealed that cuckoos found in the UK during the summer will fly 8,000km to Africa for the colder months. However, nobody knew where China's cuckoos go to escape the bitter Beijing winters. So Terry set out to uncover their secret.

He and his team planned to fit several cuckoos with solar-powered tags that would transmit a satellite-trackable signal – the BTO's own tried-and-tested method for tracing birds.

'We knew cuckoos like hot, wet places – ideal for caterpillars, their favourite food – so anywhere with rainforest was a reasonable guess,' says Terry.

Support from ZSL and partner organisations the BTO and the Beijing Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre (BWRR) helped get the project off the ground, while a public poll proposed several possible cuckoo destinations. 'Forty-six per cent suggested South East Asia, 36% Africa, 11% India and 7% elsewhere,' says Terry. If sub-Saharan Africa proved to be the end destination, as for cuckoos from the UK, that would involve, as the BTO put it, a 'mind-blowing migration'.

Passion for wildlife

At the heart of the Beijing Cuckoo Project was Terry's own passion for wildlife. Aged four, he became fascinated with birds in his family's Norfolk garden. Now living and working in Beijing, he has championed efforts to save some of China's most endangered birds, and even discovered the city's first recorded tree pipit in the UK ambassador's garden. He has always wanted to inspire others to learn about and protect the environment.

'Education and awareness, especially among young people, is fundamental,' he stresses.

With Terry enthusiastically sharing the story of the project with local and international school children in Beijing, fans worldwide would end up glued to the cuckoos' journeys on social media.

Meanwhile, a rather different sort of passion enabled Terry's team to recruit birds. They used a stuffed female cuckoo to entice males into a soft net, so they could be quickly and safely tagged with the tiny tracking devices.



YOUNG CUCKOOS ARE FAMOUSLY RAISED BY OTHER BIRDS, SUCH AS THIS REED WARBLER



SKYBOMB BOLT (THIS IMAGE) HAS ENTHRALLED PLENTY OF YOUNG WILDLIFE FANS (LEFT)



‘We added a recording of the female when ready to mate – males couldn’t resist investigating!’ says Terry. ‘BTO cuckoo expert Chris Hewson oversaw the tagging, and we fitted a tag only if it was less than 5% of the bird’s overall body weight.’

Clocking cuckoos

In May 2016, five cuckoos were tagged, including two females who’d come to see what all the fuss was about. The females were common cuckoos, *Cuculus canorus* (as seen in the UK); the males were from a subspecies of the same bird from Asia, named *bakeri*. Local school children and other birding enthusiasts helped choose names for the individual cuckoos: Flappy McFlapperson, Skybomb Bolt, Meng Zhi Juan, Hope and Zigui. Then, it was time to watch and wait.



SCHOOL CHILDREN VOTED FOR THEIR FAVOURITE CUCKOO NAMES

Unfortunately, the life of a cuckoo can be an uncertain one. ‘Threats include predation by birds of prey, droughts limiting their insect supply, and habitat destruction,’ says Terry. Zigui never moved beyond the tagging area; as temperatures plummeted, it became clear he had perished. Data from Hope’s tag suggested she, too, had died, or her tag had failed.

The other cuckoos were having better luck. Skybomb Bolt flew through China and on to Bangladesh before spending time in central India. In October, followers of Terry’s blog read: ‘Skybomb has headed out over the Indian Ocean towards Africa! He’s already flown more than 2,000km from his previous position and has more than 1,500km to go to reach land in Somalia. Simply staggering!’

On the right track

By the end of October, Skybomb had made it to Africa – a non-stop journey of more than 3,700km in under four days. It was a huge leap for cuckoo-kind – and for ornithology. Terry was elated: ‘When Skybomb’s signal was picked up over the Arabian Sea, showing for the first

time that these birds did indeed migrate to Africa, it was such a high,’ he recalls. ‘When we received a signal showing he’d completed the crossing, we were relieved and ecstatic.’

As for McFlapperson, after summering on the Mongolian-Russian border, she crossed the Mongolian desert, rested south-west of Beijing, flew 2,400km to Myanmar, touched down in Nepal, and headed to India. By 3 November, she was over the Arabian Sea, taking a more northerly trajectory to Africa than Skybomb. The next day, after flying non-stop for over 2,000km, she reached the Omani coast.

Meng Zhi Juan travelled through China, Myanmar, Bangladesh and India. In December, he began his ocean crossing, taking a southerly route like Skybomb. Anxious fans held their breath as Meng skirted rain showers, but then faced serious crosswinds. After several uneasy hours with no signal, his followers learned that Meng had made it, having flown 3,400km non-stop from India to Somalia.

‘It’s over 12,000km from Beijing to Africa and we believe cuckoos fly alone, arriving as the rains begin and then following them south,’ says Terry.

Perilous journeys

Sadness was to come, however. Media star Skybomb – who’d even made the cover of *The New York Times* – went missing in action. In November his signal was lost; by February, his demise was clear. ‘Temperature data suggests Skybomb died in November,’ says Terry. ‘He was in Mozambique in a good feeding area. We’ll never know what happened to him.’

The team paid tribute online: ‘Skybomb was a scientific pioneer, showing us for the first time where Beijing cuckoos spend the winter and the route they take to get there. His demise is a reminder of the incredible risks faced by these birds and the perilous journeys they take to survive and breed.’

Better news was to follow in May, when Meng Zhi Juan became the first bird to make it back to Beijing after his epic journey. To the delight of the team, he was even caught on camera just a few hundred metres from the spot where he was first tagged. Flappy McFlapperson, meanwhile, flew right over Beijing in late May en route to her summer breeding grounds in Mongolia. She arrived home in June, after an incredible 32,000km round trip that involved 16 countries.

The Beijing cuckoo mystery has been solved and, crucially, Terry has ignited a flame in millions of youngsters. ‘Our aim was to make scientific discoveries and engage the public,’ he says. ‘With millions having read about the cuckoos, the project has been a success beyond our wildest imagination.’

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#7 COMMON CUCKOO



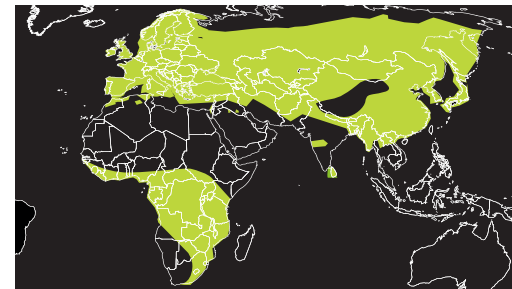
CURIOUS CREATURES

A MALE COMMON CUCKOO IN SPRING

HOW MUCH DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THE COMMON CUCKOO?

- 1 More often heard than seen, cuckoos get their name from their distinctive call, but in late summer females make a ‘bubbling’ sound instead.
- 2 Male cuckoos have blue-grey upper parts and a white belly with darker bars. Some female birds look similar, but with a more buff-coloured breast; others are reddish-brown in colour.
- 3 It takes just 10 seconds for a cuckoo to lay her eggs in another bird’s nest. Individual females will target a particular bird species – and even lay eggs that mimic those of the foster parents. Once hatched, cuckoo chicks will eject other eggs and young from the nest.
- 4 Cuckoos aren’t the only such brood parasites. Similar behaviour occurs in other birds including cowbirds, indigobirds and black-headed ducks, as well as some insects.
- 5 Cuckoos are thought to migrate alone, although it’s not unusual to see small groups congregating at migration hotspots.

FACT FILE



Common cuckoo *Cuculus canorus*
Found: wide range of habitats in Europe, Asia and sub-Saharan Africa
Length: 32-33cm
Wingspan: 58cm
Diet: insects, spiders and worms