

# The Distressed Cuckoo



Mr. Holmes was always up early. First he had a shower and a good clean shave. And then it was time for a cup of tea. He never made much noise, though. He quietly moved around the house so that his wife could sleep a little longer. They were both getting older now and a little more sleep would be a nice bonus for his wife. Mr. Holmes had retired from work about five years ago.

That did not mean he suddenly had nothing to do. No, of course not! He knew very well that the Lord had given him a place on this earth and that he was here to serve. Not to serve himself but to serve others. So the very first thing every morning was to make a nice cup of tea for his lovely wife. His wife was not so well lately. She had an operation on her leg and she still could not walk very well. So it was up to Mr. Holmes to take over much of the work.

The jug switched off which meant that the water had boiled. He made a cup of tea for himself and he also took a cup to his wife in the bedroom. She really appreciated this. She loved the way her husband fussed over her.

Then Mr. Holmes went outside and took his cup of tea with him. It was a lovely fresh morning. He sat down on a little brick wall halfway down the garden. As he looked up into one of the trees he noticed some movement. What could that be? Then he saw a tiny little bird on one of the branches. The many leaves made it difficult to see what type of bird it was. After a while the little bird came down and landed onto the lawn just a few meters away from where Mr. Holmes was sitting. He could quietly observe the little creature. He had never seen this type of bird before even though they had lived at this same place for many years. After a while another little bird joined its mate on the lawn.



Both birds had a lovely olive coloured belly and their wings were green. Their tails were black with a white tip. On their black crown they had white spots and a dark stripe near their eyes. The most striking feature was the yellow rump. They were not very shy and even came quite close to where Mr. Holmes was enjoying his cup of tea. He got up to go inside to fetch his bird book. After finding the right page he learned that the name of these birds was Yellow-rumped Thornbill. How interesting! With that yellow on their back it was not surprising they had been given the name of Yellow-rumped Thornbill. Mr. Holmes also learned from his book that these little birds are found throughout eastern and south-eastern Australia as well as in parts of Western Australia. They often feed on the ground. Usually they are in groups feeding on insects as well as seeds.

Mr. Holmes went inside again, this time to get his camera. Perhaps he could get some nice pictures of the little birds, he thought. When he came back he noticed quite a commotion in the tree where he first spotted these little birds. Perhaps there was a cat trying to eat them. It sounded quite frightening.

What was happening?

It sounded as if some birds were fighting each other.

Much to Mr. Holmes' surprise there was a third bird. This one, though, was much larger than the Yellow-rumped Thornbills. There was much noise and movement in the tree and he could not see exactly what was happening. Then he noticed that the third bird was a cuckoo. Suddenly Mr. Holmes understood what was happening. The cuckoo was trying to lay one of her own eggs in the nest of the Yellow-rumped Thornbills. That did not seem very fair. And naturally the two little birds were most upset



about this. They had built the nest and now another bird was planning to lay its egg in their nest. They had worked very hard to get it finished on time. It was a beautiful nest and quite large for such little birds. It even seemed too large. In fact it was built in two compartments. One section of the nest was the real one with its own entrance and the second section also had its own entrance. Perhaps by building it like this they tried to trick birds of prey. Somehow they had to stop this cuckoo, this intruder. They pecked at it and screeched at it but the cuckoo would not move. It was determined to lay its egg in the nest. In fact it never built its own nest. The Creator had created the cuckoo in such a way that it always laid its egg in the nest of other birds, usually smaller birds. Even though the cuckoo was only following its own instinct the little birds were not impressed at all. They kept on pestering the cuckoo until it finally flew away.

Mr. Holmes had been watching all this from a distance. Then he noticed that the cuckoo had landed on the lawn, totally exhausted, only a few meters from where he was having his cup of tea. The little Yellow-rumped Thornbills had made life very difficult for the cuckoo. It just lay there, very still. In fact it seemed as if it was dead. Mr. Holmes stood up, camera in his hand, to investigate what had happened. The cuckoo really did seem dead. These little birds must have been too hard on the cuckoo. He carefully touched it with his hand and rolled it over.

And what did he see?

There under the cuckoo was one egg. Of course that was the egg it was trying to lay in the nest of those two Yellow-rumped Thornbills.

These two little birds had just managed to stop it from laying that egg in their nest. Now they were satisfied and flew back to their nest in the nearby tree. Much to their dismay, though, they noticed that their own two eggs had been crushed during the struggle with the cuckoo. This made them very sad. They had put so much effort in building their nest and the mother bird had already laid a couple of eggs. Now it was all gone. No happiness for them. How tragic! They did not realise, though, that they

would have lost their eggs anyway. For the cuckoo would most likely have thrown them all out of the nest. For that is what cuckoos usually do. They take over completely as if it is their own nest. But they never look after their own offspring. They leave that to the other birds in whose nest they left their egg. It was then up to the little birds to feed the young cuckoo



when it hatched. Sometimes if their own eggs had not been thrown out of the nest yet their own eggs hatched at the same time as that of the cuckoo. But then the struggle for survival began. The cuckoo was of course a bigger bird than the other little birds in the same nest. So you can imagine that when the parents came to the nest with some food that then the cuckoo was often the first to get it. He just pushed in even when it was not his turn. That

seemed very selfish. The result was that the younger and smaller birds got less and less food and eventually they died. Then the little cuckoo would throw them out of the nest.

Mr. Holmes had managed to take some very nice pictures of all that had happened. The cuckoo had recovered from her ordeal and had already flown away. A few weeks later he noticed the two little birds sitting on a branch of a nearby tree and believe it or not they were feeding a young cuckoo. So the intruder, the parasite, had come back on another day and still sneakily laid an egg in the nest of the Yellow-rumped Thornbills. This young cuckoo had grown up now and had already left the nest. Its real mother did not look after it but the foster parents, the Yellow-rumped Thornbills, were kept extremely busy. The baby cuckoo was by now much bigger than its foster parents. And they were having a hard time keeping up with all the demands. They were busily gathering all kinds of insects and kept feeding the young bird until it could look after itself. Cuckoos



love insects and especially hairy caterpillars, the ones that are not liked by other birds.

Several weeks later the pair of Yellow-rumped Thornbills finally had their nest to themselves. The mother bird had laid four little eggs into the nest. She laid the eggs in the proper compartment as she never uses the false compartment of the nest. When they built the nest they had some help from another couple of Yellow-rumper Thornbills. Guess what happened after about seventeen days. The first egg cracked open and there was her firstborn. During the next three days the other three eggs cracked open. Now they had some young ones of their own. No cuckoo in the nest this time, who gobbled up all the food that the parents brought in. These were their very own. This was their little family. Both parents were so very happy with their little family, as you can imagine. Mother and father bird were kept very busy finding enough food for these four hungry mouths. After about nineteen days they were ready to leave the nest. Now they had to fend for themselves. They were busy looking for insects and seeds on the lawn.

The parents of these little birds were so happy. They sang to their Creator from early morning until sunset. It all happened the way the Lord had planned it. First they had to look after the cuckoo's egg and baby and then they had a family of their own. It is no wonder they were singing all day long.

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November 2007