

MONTEREY NEWS

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Communal Tenters and Rain Crows

Oh, the cuckoo, she's a pretty bird
And she warbles as she flies.
But she never hollers "cuckoo"
'Til the first day of July.

— Southern American Folksong
originally from England

The cuckoo, also called the Rain Crow, has been hollering every day for weeks around here, but suddenly she is quiet. Listening to her through the summer, I thought about the tent caterpillars, those handsome bristly youngsters that make their webs in apple trees, and wild cherries, and many another local tree. My book describes this caterpillar: "the body is lavishly variegated in steel blue, black, orange, and white." (Caterpillars of Eastern North America, David L. Wagner, Princeton and Oxford, 2005)

Like the gypsy moth caterpillar, the tent caterpillar is protected by many stiff little hairs. These are called setae, and can pierce the stomachs and intestines of most birds, but the cuckoo has a remarkable system for dealing with caterpillar bristles. They pile up in the stomach, making a kind of felting against the stomach lining. When digestion becomes impeded by this, the stomach lining is sloughed off and shed, along with the felt, and a new stomach lining has formed, all ready to go.

The cuckoos follow the tent caterpillars, of which we had many this summer. Eggs are laid in clumps by the female moths and covered with a protective layer of varnish-like froth called spumaline. When they hatch in the spring, the caterpillars venture a short distance and start making the communal tent or web. Then they move out every day and climb around looking for leaves to eat, but come back to the tent to get inside and digest in safety.

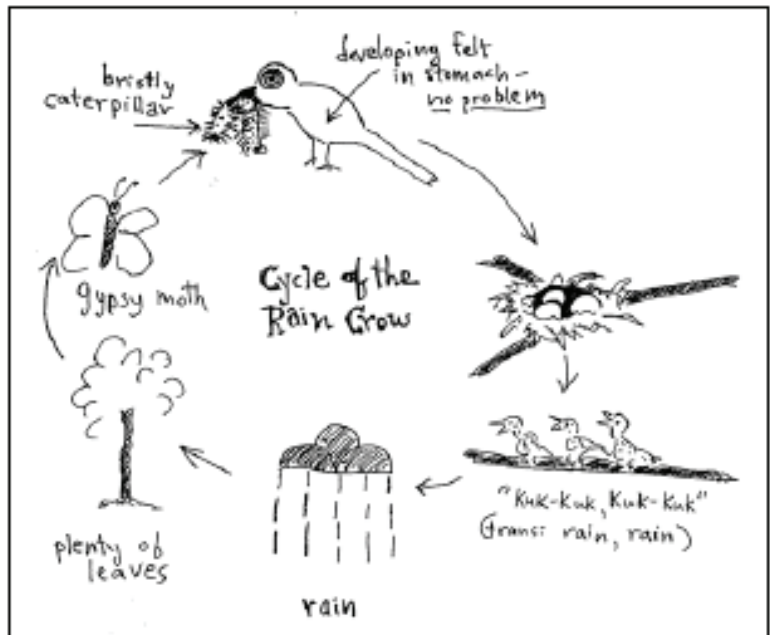
The cuckoos don't go after them when they are in the tent, which also functions

as a greenhouse that keeps the caterpillars warm on chilly days. This is helpful for digestion and other "metabolic processes," says my book. Our cuckoos don't actually say "cuckoo" like a cuckoo clock. We have two species, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo and the Black-billed Cuckoo, which is the more

common. This bird says, "po . . . po . . . po . . . po . . ." on and on. You can hear it but you can't find it! They blend in well, with their pale underparts, barred tails, and grey uppers. They have a red ring around each eye, but you have to locate the bird first to notice this and they are "... inconspicuous and move furtively through dense foliage of bushes and trees in search of caterpillars." So writes David Sibley in *The Sibley Guide to Birds*, Knopf, 2000.

That folk song in which the bird hollers "cuckoo" refers to the European cuckoo, which speaks while in flight. I have heard this in England. You hear "cuck" and then "ooo," uttered several wingbeats later. The European cuckoo is also famous for leaving its eggs in the nests of other birds, just as our cowbirds do. Those cuckoos when they hatch come equipped with a concavity in their backs, perfect for getting under a host baby and humping it right out of the nest. Later the cuckoo's backbone straightens out.

Our Black-billed Cuckoos occasionally leave an egg in the nest of another bird, but mostly they incubate their own eggs, which



hatch in ten days if the weather is warm. The nests are made of twigs and sticks, lined with leaves and catkins. In his *Journal*, June 1853, Henry Thoreau gives a detailed description of a cuckoo's nest, "made of slender twigs which are prettily ornamented with much ramalina lichen, lined with hickory catkins and pitch pine needles."

Our Rain Crows are silent now, maybe flown south already, and the caterpillars' tents are gone. Some of these communal campers have gone on to their next chapter, to pupate in individual cocoons and emerge next year as fawn-colored moths, looking for a place to lay clusters of eggs for the next generation of tenters. Others have gone on like inconspicuous birds, moving quietly southward to spend a warm winter before coming back north to lay their eggs for the next generation of Rain Crows.

"Po . . . po . . . po . . . po . . ."

May there always be caterpillars and cuckoos, and may there be rain.

— Bonner McAllester