

# Koel response to a small python

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## Abstract

A male and female Eastern Koel responded to a small Australian Scrub Python, a possible predator, with noiseless bobbing behaviour and flaring of the tail, behaviour that has not previously been reported.

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Koels (Eastern Koel, *Eudynamys orientalis*) are welcome visitors to our place in Mount Molloy (16°40'S, 145°20'E), returning here from areas to the north of Australia in late spring and leaving here in autumn. We indulge ourselves by providing bananas for some of our local birds and visiting Koels who readily accept this food source.

On the afternoon of 15 December 2016, an Australian Scrub Python (*Simalia kinghorni*; formerly known as the Amethyst Python, *Morelia amethystina*, and as *Morelia kinghorni*) about one metre in length was climbing about in a shrub approximately 1.5 metres away from the feeder, when it was detected and loudly announced by numerous birds. Prominent amongst the birds were a few Blue-faced Honeyeaters (*Entomyzon cyanotis*), a Great Bowerbird (*Ptilonorhynchus nuchalis*), a Little Shrike-thrush (*Colluricincla megarhyncha*), Yellow Honeyeaters (*Lichenostomus flavus*) and Brown-backed Honeyeaters (*Ramsayornis modestus*).

When the cacophony started, a male Koel which had already eaten some banana was perched four metres from the python and two metres above it. The adult female was still on the feeder six metres from the python and two metres above. The male Koel appeared to have caught sight of the python about five minutes after the Blue-faced Honeyeaters first announced its presence. The Koel then began to bob up and down, not moving its feet but making an up-down motion with its body that resembled a shudder or tremble. There was a little wing lifting, a little side-to side weaving, some

tail flaring, but most of the action was bobbing or very restrained hopping without moving the feet.

A few minutes later, with the male still responding to the python, the female Koel also began to give her attention to the snake, performing the same bobbing movements. Both birds kept up these actions for at least five minutes. By now the snake had pulled itself into a huddle on the shrub and most of the chattering birds had dispersed. However, both Koels moved in short hops toward the lump of snake, giving it their full attention. Tail feathers were flared each time either Koel hopped nearer the python, followed by more bobbing at the conclusion of each hop. Neither bird made any vocalisation throughout the entire episode.

I managed one photograph showing the flared tail (Fig. 1), then disturbed the Koels by walking beneath the perched birds to place a fresh banana on the board where they are accustomed to feed. The male flew off, whereas the female moved only a short distance.

Neither this nor any other response of Koels to predators has previously been reported (Higgins 1999). The significance of the bobbing and tail flaring is unclear but may be a visual distraction to the snake or a signal to the partner. A Scrub Python of this size is a potential predator of Koel eggs or nestlings; it seemed much too small to take an adult. The Koel is a brood parasite, laying its eggs in nests of a variety of host species including those of the Blue-faced Honeyeater and a close relative of the Little Shrike-thrush, the Grey Shrike-thrush (*Colluricincla harmonica*) (Higgins 1999). In general,



**Figure 1. Koels, Coucals and perhaps many of the Cuckoos have only 10 tail feathers, contrasting with the common number of 12 found in many birds. Here the male Koel has hopped a little closer to the python (not in frame), with neck craned and tail flared as the hop is completed.**

brood-parasitic cuckoos are not known to defend the nests of birds they have parasitised. However, the Great Spotted Cuckoo (*Clamator glandarius*) of Africa and the Mediterranean basin scolded visitors to nests it had parasitised but not nests of the same host that it had not parasitised (Soler *et al.* 1999). Thus, the response of the Koels might have been in defense of their eggs or nestlings.

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## References

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