



News

Cambridge News > News > Cambridge > Mob rules in cuckoo wars

Print page

- Cambridge
- Ely
- Hunt'don/St Ives
- N'mkt & Haverhill
- Royston
- Saffron Walden
- St Neots
- Video/Audio
- Picture Galleries
- Traffic Updates
- Travel
- Features
- National News
- A14 Campaign
- Messageboards
- Blogs
- Previous Polls
- Press Relief
- Letters
- Junior News
- RSS Feeds
- E-Edition

Mob rules in cuckoo wars

A NEW study has shown how reed warblers fight off bullying cuckoos trying to invade their nests.

A Cambridge University study, published in a prestigious national journal today, has shown how the birds work with their neighbours to form "mobs" and attack parasitic cuckoos which attempt to lay eggs in their nests.

Video footage showed a gang of the tiny grey birds gathering to attack a wooden model of a cuckoo planted near their nests by scientists.

They will swoop and peck at invading cuckoos in an attempt to drive them away.

The highly territorial warblers form into mobs of up to five birds when they hear a rasping call from one of their neighbours.

The signal warns other warblers there is a cuckoo about, making them more likely to eject any foreign eggs from their nests.

Although reed warblers do not build nests less than 10 metres apart, a rasp will trigger an exceptional call to arms as they cluster to defend their territory.

Inexperienced warblers learned the importance of defending their nests against cuckoos by observing the mobbing behaviour of other members of their species.

Scientists were surprised to discover the birds could recognise and tell each other which foreign invaders were a true threat.

The warblers only gave the rasp call when they spotted cuckoos and left harmless

control birds alone, indicating they would only unleash defensive behaviour in response to serious threats.

Once a mobbing call is sounded the warblers will attack any foreign objects in their territory - even plastic bottles.

But their aggression has the potential to backfire, leaving warblers vulnerable to injury and other predators.

Lead researcher Dr Justin Welbergen, of the Behavioural Ecology Group at Cambridge University, said the findings were significant for understanding social learning.

He said: "Our previous work showed that reed warblers distinguish cuckoos from other nest enemies and adjust their defences according to local parasitism risk."

The reed warbler lives with the threat of a cuckoo infiltrating its nest, removing one of its eggs, and replacing it with the cuckoo's own.

This enables the cuckoo to have its young raised by unsuspecting reed warblers.

The findings, collated over three seasons of field work in Wicken Fen, were published in the journal Science.

Sport

- Cricket
- Racing
- Athletics
- Tennis
- Cambridge United
- Histon
- Cambridge City
- Cambridge RUFC
- National Sport

Announcements

Business

- Events Diary
- Jobs

What's On

- Events Search
- Live Reviews
- TV Gossip
- TV Listings
- TV Pick
- Music
- Stage
- Cinema

Lifestyle

- Messageboard
- Sudoku
- Food & Drink
- Gaming
- Events Search
- Announcements

Buy Your Paper

Pay Your Bill

Marketplace

Magazines

Competitions

Jobs

Property

Motors

Directory

E-Editions

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[Back to top](#)

