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## The first Spring cuckoo... on film

Rare footage from the BFI National Archive sheds light on roguish bird behaviour

Though it may be dubbed the murderer, thief and cheat of the bird world, the cuckoo is rapidly disappearing – but rare film footage is about to give TV viewers an extraordinary glimpse into the wily ways of this infamous bird.

The rediscovered footage is featured in *Cuckoo*, a new programme made for BBC series Natural World. Narrated by **Sir David Attenborough**, the programme also uses new cinematography and the latest scientific findings to help explain how the cuckoo tricks other birds into incubating its eggs and raising its young.

The unique archival recording comes from a film shot by wildlife film pioneer **Oliver Pike**, *The Cuckoo's Secret* – the first film ever to capture a cuckoo laying her egg in another bird's nest. This is an event that happens so quickly and surreptitiously that it has only been filmed on two or three other occasions in Britain since then.

Changes in British countryside mean there are 50% fewer cuckoos now than when Oliver Pike made his film over 80 years ago.

*Cuckoo*'s producer Mike Birkhead says: "It's just as well the old footage existed because the cuckoo's decline, and an appallingly wet summer, meant that we failed to shoot an egg-laying sequence again.

"There's a message for us all here: that preserving old wildlife film is crucially important. As more and more species head towards extinction, we may find that film provides our only record of certain species or aspects of their behaviour."

As well as providing the all-important egg-laying sequence, the Pike footage also helped the *Cuckoo* crew to stage a historical re-enactment of a pioneering cuckoo study, and build a camouflage basketry camera hide exactly like the one used by Pike.

Jan Faull, the BFI's Archive Producer, says, "This programme sees the BBC revisit the origins of wildlife film-making, bringing the work of this legendary wildlife film-maker to a wider audience. It provides a glimpse of the pioneering work of some of the first Britons to document wildlife on film. We have a wealth of other examples within the BFI National Archive, and we're looking forward to these undiscovered gems being shared with a television audience at some future point."

ENDS

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NOTES TO EDITORS

### **Cuckoo**

*Cuckoo* is a Mike Birkhead Associates' production, for the BBC series NATURAL WORLD, that uses rare archive film, astonishing new footage of cuckoos and the latest scientific findings to tell a gripping tale of Springtime murder, mystery and deceit.

**1<sup>st</sup> transmission: 8pm, Friday 9 January 2009, BBC2**

Cameras: Alastair MacEwen, Mark Payne-Gill & (1921 film) Oliver Pike

Narrator: Sir David Attenborough

Producer: Mike Birkhead

Series Editor: Tim Martin

*Cuckoo* shows exactly how the cuckoo spends its brief annual visit to Britain, using a combination of archive footage by wildlife film pioneer, Oliver Pike, a re-enactment of a study carried out in the 1920s by Edgar Chance, new film, using new techniques, by award-winning cameraman Alastair MacEwen, and the latest findings by Professor Nick Davies, of Cambridge University, who has been studying cuckoos on the National Trust's Wicken Fen, and elsewhere, for more than 20 years – all presented by television's best wildlife story-teller, Sir David Attenborough.

### **Oliver Pike**

**Oliver Pike** was a pioneer of natural history photography and cinematography from the late 1890s, photographing wildlife in its natural surroundings. His claim to significance lies in the groundbreaking techniques he developed to capture animals in their natural habitats and in the fact that he passed this knowledge on. He published 25 books on the subject as well as making over 50 films and giving many lectures.

When still young, he developed his own stills camera, the 'Birdland', so good that it was bought by a London manufacturer. He later designed a cine-camera for wildlife photography that was camouflaged so as not to scare away the animals. He had a profound knowledge of photographic technique, as demonstrated by his handbooks on photography and cinematography, and by his surviving films, which contain use of focal planes unprecedented in their time.

Pike donated several of his films to the BFI National Archive.

### **The BFI National Archive**

The BFI National Archive The BFI National Archive is the world's most significant collection of moving image material. It contains more than 230,000 films (features, shorts and documentaries) and more than 675,000 television programmes. The collection also contains internationally renowned holdings of posters, stills and designs along with the papers of major directors.

The collection is made available through public screenings at festivals and cinemas throughout the UK including regular screenings at BFI Southbank, alongside video and DVD releases, and online through the BFI's unique education resource, Screenonline ([www.screenonline.org.uk](http://www.screenonline.org.uk)).