



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service
Sacramento Fish & Wildlife Office
Species Account
YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO
Coccyzus americanus



CLASSIFICATION: Candidate
Federal Register 66:38611; July 25, 2001
<http://www.fws.gov/endangered/pdfs/FR/n010725.pdf>

CRITICAL HABITAT: None

RECOVERY PLAN: None

DESCRIPTION

The yellow-billed cuckoo is a medium-sized bird of about 30 centimeters (cm) (12 inches (in.)) in length, and weighing about 60 grams (2 ounces). The species has a slender, long-tailed profile, with a fairly stout and slightly down-curved bill which is blue-black with yellow on the base of the lower mandible.

Plumage is grayish-brown above and white below, with red primary flight feathers. The tail feathers are boldly patterned with black and white below. The legs are short and bluish-gray. Adults have a narrow, yellow eye ring. Juveniles resemble adults, except the tail patterning is less distinct, and the lower bill may have little or no yellow.

The yellow-billed cuckoo is a member of the avian family Cuculidae. Some ornithologists have separated the species into eastern and western subspecies. This distinction remains controversial, however we have determined that there is a western distinct vertebrate population segment that we can consider for listing. See our 12-month finding (above) for details.

Western yellow-billed cuckoos breed in large blocks of riparian habitats (particularly woodlands with cottonwoods and willows). Dense understory foliage appears to be an important factor in nest site selection. Cottonwood trees are an important foraging habitat in areas where the species has been studied in California (Laymon et al. 1993).

Clutch size is usually two or three eggs. Development of the young are very rapid, with a breeding cycle of 17 days from egg-laying to fledging of young. Although yellow-billed cuckoos usually raise their own young, they occasionally lay eggs in the nests of other yellow-billed cuckoos or of other bird species (Hughes 1997).

Western yellow-billed cuckoos appear to require large blocks of riparian habitat for nesting. Along the Sacramento River in California, nesting yellow-billed cuckoos occupied home ranges which included 25 acres (10 hectares) or more of riparian habitat (Gaines 1974; Laymon et al. 1993). Another study on the same river found riparian patches with yellow-billed cuckoo pairs to average 99 acres (40 hectares) (Halterman 1991). Home ranges in the South Fork of the Kern River in California averaged about 42 acres (17 hectares) (Laymon et al. 1993).

DISTRIBUTION

The breeding range of the yellow-billed cuckoo formerly included most of North America from southern Canada to the Greater Antilles and northern Mexico. In recent years, the species' distribution in the west has contracted. The northern limit of breeding in the coastal States is now in Sacramento Valley (AOU 1998).

The species overwinters from Columbia and Venezuela, south to northern Argentina (Ehrlich et al. 1992; AOU 1998). The extent to which yellow-billed cuckoos nesting in different regions of North America mingle during migration, or while overwintering, is unknown.

THREATS

Principal causes of riparian habitat losses are conversion to agricultural and other uses, dams and river flow management, stream channelization and stabilization, and livestock grazing. Available breeding habitats for yellowbilled cuckoos have also been substantially reduced in area and quality by groundwater pumping, and the replacement of native riparian habitats by invasive non-native plants, particularly tamarisk.

Much of the dramatic decline of the yellow-billed cuckoo in California has been directly attributed to breeding habitat loss from clearing and removal of riparian forest for agriculture, urban development and flood control.

Overuse by livestock has been a major factor in the degradation and modification of riparian habitats in the western United States. The effects include changes in plant community structure and species composition, and relative abundance of species and plant density.

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