



Decision to List the Western Distinct Population Segment of the Yellow-Billed Cuckoo as a Threatened Species

Questions and Answers

Species Description

The western yellow-billed cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) is a neotropical migrant bird that winters in South America and breeds in western North America. It is an insect-eating bird that lives in riparian woodlands.

Adult yellow-billed cuckoos are medium-size birds about 12 inches long, weighing around two ounces. They have moderate to heavy bills, somewhat elongated bodies and a narrow yellow ring of colored bare skin around the eye. The plumage is loose and grayish-brown above and white below, with reddish primary flight feathers. The tail feathers are boldly patterned with black and white below.



Photo Credit: Mark Dettling/Point Blue

Yellow-billed cuckoos have feet that are zygodactyl (two toes pointing forward and two toes pointing backward). Juveniles resemble adults except the tail patterning is less distinct, and the lower bill has little or no yellow coloring. Males have a slightly smaller body size and smaller bill than females, and the white portions of their tails tend to form distinct oval spots.

A typically secretive and hard-to-detect bird, mated yellow-billed cuckoos have a distinctive “kowlp” call which is a loud, nonmusical series of notes that slows down and slurs toward the end.

Questions and Answers

Q. What has been decided?

A. The Service has determined that listing a distinct population segment (DPS) of the yellow-billed cuckoo as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) in the western United States, Canada and Mexico is warranted. In the United States, U.S., the DPS will cover portions of Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Texas, Utah, Wyoming, Montana, Oregon and Washington.

Being added to the Federal List of Threatened and Endangered Animals gives protection to the cuckoo from threats that have been found to jeopardize its continued existence. At the same time, it provides a means by which the species can eventually be recovered and removed from the list.

Q: Will there be new water-related requirements associated with this listing decision?

A: Although the major threat to yellow-billed cuckoos has been loss of riverside habitat, we do not anticipate any significant new water-related requirements as a result of this listing decision. The water resource requirements for riparian habitat are not unique to cuckoos, and in many cases are already being implemented for other species. Riparian restoration efforts go hand-in-hand with good land management, especially management that promotes good livestock grazing practices.

Q. How will listing the cuckoo affect operations and the building and maintenance of dams in the western United States?

A. Although the ongoing operation of dams in the West is likely to have minor impacts to the species at any given location, we believe this threat has a substantial cumulative impact on the habitat of the western yellow-billed cuckoo, especially when considered with other threats.

Within the range of the species, new dams have been proposed, and several existing dams are being considered for expansion. Listing the cuckoo will ensure federal agencies charged with building and operating those dams consult with the Service to ensure that they won't jeopardize the continued existence of the cuckoo.

Q. How will listing the cuckoo affect public access to public lands?

A. It is very unlikely that listing the western yellow-billed cuckoo will have any effect on access to public lands as direct human disturbance is not seen as a major threat to the species.

Q. What are the specific threats to the western yellow-billed cuckoo?

A. The Service has determined that the western yellow-billed cuckoo is threatened by:

- The present or threatened destruction, modification or curtailment of its habitat or range: Threats to the western yellow-billed cuckoo result from habitat destruction and modification due to dam construction and operations; water diversions; river flow management; stream channelization and stabilization; conversion to agricultural uses, such as crops and livestock grazing; urban and transportation infrastructure; and increased incidence of wildfire. These factors also contribute to habitat fragmentation and promote invasion by nonnative plant species, particularly

tamarisk. The threats affecting western yellow-billed cuckoo habitat are ongoing and serious.

- Other natural or manmade factors affecting its continued existence: Habitat scarcity and small, isolated populations of the western yellow-billed cuckoo cause the remaining cuckoo populations to be increasingly susceptible to further declines through lack of immigration, chance weather events, fluctuating availability of prey populations, pesticide effects on prey species, and climate change.

Q. Why has the Service listed the western yellow-billed cuckoo as threatened rather than endangered?

A. Under the ESA, an endangered species is defined as any species that is in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of its range. A threatened species is defined as any species that is likely to become endangered throughout all or a significant portion of its range within the foreseeable future.

The western yellow-billed cuckoo does not meet the definition of endangered because it does not face any known sudden and calamitous threats, is not yet restricted to a critically small range, and is not yet reduced to critically low numbers.

Q. Hasn't the species declined because of the drought, and won't it recover as the rains return?

A. Although drought may be having a negative effect on the western yellow-billed cuckoo, the declines in the western yellow-billed cuckoo's range and populations have occurred through both wet and dry periods over the past 150 years.

Q. What about threats from recreational shooting, solar power generation and wind power?

A. In our evaluation, we determined that although these activities may impact cuckoo populations, they will not have a significant effect on the species.

Q. How do grazing and other agricultural activities impact the species?

A. Most of the direct loss of habitat from agricultural conversion already has occurred. However, ongoing agricultural activities, in whole or in combination with other impacts – especially those that result in changes in a watercourse's hydrology – restrict or prevent growth of riparian plants, thereby reducing nesting and foraging habitat for the western yellow-billed cuckoo.

Most of the current impacts from agricultural land uses arise from livestock overgrazing in riparian areas. Without proper management to reduce overgrazing, this may continue to contribute to habitat modification in the range of the western yellow-billed cuckoo.

Q. How does the use of pesticides affect the species?

A. Pesticide use is widespread in agricultural areas in the western yellow-billed cuckoo breeding range in the United States and northern Mexico. Because much of the species' habitat is in proximity to agriculture, the potential exists for direct and indirect effects to a large portion of the species in these areas through altered physiological functioning, prey availability, and, therefore, reproductive success, which ultimately results in lower population abundance and curtailment of the occupied range. While agricultural pesticides can kill prey of the yellow-billed cuckoo, and documentation exists of pesticide exposure in the wild, no known data are available to determine specifically how often agricultural chemicals may be affecting yellow-billed cuckoo prey availability, locations where it may be particularly significant, or the extent to which pesticides may be responsible for population-level effects in the western yellow-billed cuckoo. However, based on the close proximity of agricultural areas to where the western yellow-billed cuckoo breeds, the threat is potentially significant.

Q. Will listing the western yellow-billed cuckoo disrupt recovery efforts for the southwestern willow flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii extimus*) and the silvery minnow (*Hybognathus amarus*)?

A. Although additional coordination will be required to ensure the needs for all three species are considered for a potential recovery action, we do not believe the planning process will necessarily favor or harm any one single species.

Q. What impact could climate change have on the western yellow-billed cuckoo?

A. Although we do not have evidence to suggest the habitat of the western yellow-billed cuckoo is being affected substantially by climate change at this time, we expect long-term climate trends to have an overall negative effect on the available habitat throughout the breeding range of the western yellow-billed cuckoo. In areas of declining rainfall, it is anticipated that the quality of habitat will decline.

Q. Is the species currently being protected in Canada and Mexico?

A. The yellow-billed cuckoo is not identified as a species that is sensitive, threatened or endangered under Canadian law. British Columbia considers the western yellow-billed cuckoo as an extirpated breeder, but that the species still occurs as a migrant within the province.

In Mexico, there are no known regulatory mechanisms or conservation planning efforts in place that specifically target the conservation of western yellow-billed cuckoo. Current efforts there for protecting the western yellow-billed cuckoo primarily consist of identifying areas as Important Bird Conservation Areas (Áreas de Importancia para la

Conservación de las Aves), but no specific projects or conservation efforts are focused on the western yellow-billed cuckoo or its habitat.

Q. What happens next?

A. The Service will finalize critical habitat for the species and develop a recovery plan. Both processes will be strengthened by participation of federal and state agencies, tribal entities, NGOs, industry and the public through open comment periods and requests for input. Once these steps are complete, the Service will work to help ensure projects with the potential to impact the species can occur in a manner that conserves the species. The final critical habitat rule is expected to publish August 2015. A timeline for the recovery plan has not yet been identified.

MORE QUESTIONS?

Please write or call:

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