

CUCKOOS — FAMILY CUCULIDAE

Yellow-billed Cuckoo *Coccyzus americanus*

In western North America, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo lives only in extensive stands of mature riparian woodland. On a statewide basis, the cuckoo is now the bird closest to extirpation from California, reflecting the decimation of its habitat. The California Department of Fish and Game has

listed it as endangered. In San Diego County the Yellow-billed Cuckoo is now only a rare and sporadic summer visitor, not known to have nested for decades.

Breeding distribution: Since 1980, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo has been encountered in San Diego County nine times, always in or near significant stands of riparian wil-

lows and cottonwoods. Along the Santa Margarita River, at the upper end of Ysidora Basin (F5), there was one 4–5 July 1984 (L. Salata, AB 38:1062, 1984) and another 7–11 July 2000 (D. Kisner, J. M. Wells). One was at Guajome Lake (G7) 11–12 June 1992 (F. R. Tainter, AB 46:1179, 1992). At the uppermost end of the basin of Lake Hodges (K11), up to three individuals were seen 14–22 July 1992 (J. Smith, AB 46:1179, 1992) and a single bird was seen 1–4 June 1997 (E. C. Hall, FN 51:1054, 1997). In the Tijuana River valley one was seen 18 August 1985 (J. Oldenettel, AB 40:159, 1986) and another, in Smuggler's Gulch (W10), 28 June 2001 (P. Howard, NAB 55:483, 2001). On the desert slope of the mountains, along San Felipe Creek 1 mile west-northwest of Scissors Crossing (J22), one was seen and heard 6–12 July 2001 (T. Gallion, P. D. Jorgensen, NAB 55:483, 2001) and again 12 July 2002 (P. D. Jorgensen, NAB 56:486, 2002)

Nesting: Using primarily willow twigs in southern California, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo builds a rather coarse nest, placing it in the outer branches of willow trees (Jay 1911, which see for photos of nests). The only dates of nesting reported from San Diego County are of a female with a brood patch collected at Escondido 30 June 1915 (Dixon 1916) and egg sets collected at Escondido 2 July 1932 and 3 July 1915 (Willett 1933).

Migration: Of all summer visitors to California, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo is the latest to arrive, seldom seen before the first of June. Before the population collapse, the cuckoos sometimes occurred earlier; at Pauma Valley (E12) E. Beemer noted one 4 May 1948, and in Los Angeles County Jay (1911) reported seeing one 5 May 1907 and finding newly hatched young 10 May 1901. But otherwise dates for the cuckoo in San Diego County range only from 1 June to 23 August (1969, one at Batiqitos Lagoon, J7, AFN 24:100a, 1970). There are only three or four records of migrants away from riparian woodland.

Conservation: The Yellow-billed Cuckoo was never common in San Diego County but was confirmed nesting at Escondido in 1915 and 1932 and at Bonita in 1932 (Dixon 1916, Willett 1933). Before 1980 it was reported also from possible breeding habitat at Pauma Valley, the San Luis Rey River near Bonsall (E. Beemer), 3 miles north of Vista (C. S. Wilson, AB 32:1209, 1978), Poway (Belding 1890), Sorrento Valley (Sams and Stott 1959), and the Tijuana River valley (von Bloeker 1931).



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

The collapse of Yellow-billed Cuckoo's population throughout the western United States was due primarily to the wholesale destruction of riparian woodland, which now covers only a few percent of its original extent. Spraying of pesticides in the 1950s was likely responsible for decimating the cuckoos in the remaining tracts of their habitat in coastal southern California (Gaines and Laymon 1984). Along the Colorado River, a possible source for repopulation of coastal southern California has been nearly eliminated. Most of the once vast forest of native willows and cottonwoods there was chopped down and bulldozed, then replaced with the exotic saltcedar, a process greatly accelerated by floods in the mid 1980s (Laymon and Halterman 1987, Rosenberg et al. 1991). Factors operating over a regional scale are driving the cuckoo to extirpation; it has declined even where habitat is stable or increasing. The cuckoo requires the largest stands of riparian woodland of any of California's riparian birds; in the Sacramento Valley, Gaines (1974) reported it absent from tracts covering less than 3 hectares, and far larger tracts may be necessary to sustain a viable population.

Taxonomy: The Yellow-billed Cuckoos of western North America are significantly larger than those of the East, but there appears to be too much overlap in measurements for the populations to be recognized as subspecies (Patten et al. 2003). In any case, the taxonomic question does not vitiate the urgency of conservation measures to save the Yellow-billed Cuckoo over a huge fraction of its natural range.