

**ARIZONA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT  
HERITAGE DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEM**

**Animal Abstract**

**Element Code:** ABNRB02020

**Data Sensitivity:** No

**CLASSIFICATION, NOMENCLATURE, DESCRIPTION, RANGE**

**NAME:** *Coccyzus americanus* L.

**COMMON NAME:** Yellow-billed Cuckoo (Western U.S. DPS [Distinct Population Segment]),  
Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Chow-chow, kow-kow, rain bird, rain crow, rain dove, storm crow

**SYNONYMS:** *Coccyzus americanus occidentalis* Ridgeway

**FAMILY:** Cuculidae

**AUTHOR, PLACE OF PUBLICATION:** *Cuculus americanus* Linnaeus, Syst. Nat., ed. 10, vol. 1, 1758, p.111. Subspecies *C. [occyzus] americanus occidentalis* Ridgeway, Man. North Amer. Birds, 1887, p. 273. (AOU 1957[1961]).

**TYPE LOCALITY:** Species: In Carolina = South Carolina.

\*\*Western DPS: "Western United States = Gardner's Ranch on the western side of the Santa Rita Mountains, Arizona."

**TYPE SPECIMEN:** US 99204, E.W. Nelson, 29 June 1884.

**TAXONOMIC UNIQUENESS:** Recent genetic research by Dr. Banks indicates that there is no genetic difference between the eastern and western subspecies of *C. americanus* (FR 66(143):38611, 2001); however, this conclusion is not accepted by all ornithologists (see FR 66(143):38611, 2001). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed as a Candidate species, the Western Distinct Population Segment (DPS). This includes those yellow-billed cuckoos west of the Rocky Mountains; please see 2001 Federal Register for complete delineation of range.

**DESCRIPTION:** A long and slender medium-sized bird of about 30 cm (12 in) in length, weighing about 60 g (2 oz), with relatively short dark legs. The species has a slender, long-tailed profile, with a stout and slightly down-curved bill. The bill is blue-black with yellow on the basal half of the lower mandible (bill). Adults have a narrow, yellow eye ring. The plumage is grayish-brown above and white below, with rufous primaries flight feathers. Tail feathers are boldly patterned with black and white below. Juveniles resemble adults, except the tail patterning is less distinct, and the lower bill may have little or no yellow; the plumage is held well into fall. Juveniles may be confused with *C. erythrophthalmus* (Scott 1987). Adult males and females slightly differ, as males tend to have a slightly larger bill. (Corman 1992, USFWS accessed 10-31-2011).

**AIDS TO IDENTIFICATION:** "Song sounds hollow and wooden, a rapid staccato *kuk-kuk-kuk* that usually slows and descends to a *kakakowlp-kowlp* ending" (Scott 1987).

**ILLUSTRATIONS:**

- Color drawing (Robbins et al. 1983:172)
- Color drawing (Scott 1987:237)
- Color drawing (Peterson 1990:213)
- Color photo (Terres 1980:130)
- Color photo (Birdpix.com, <http://www.birdspix.com/>)
- Color photo of head and bill (<http://www.migrationresearch.com>)
- Color photo (<http://www.fws.gov>)

**TOTAL RANGE:** The Western Distinct Population Segment (DPS), nests west of the Rocky Mountains in North America south to southern Baja California. Winters in South America to central Argentina and Uruguay (Terres 1980).

**Current/Potential:** Arizona probably contains the largest remaining population W of Rocky Mountains; the species is rare in Colorado and Idaho; the breeding population in Nevada is threatened with extinction if not already extirpated. West Texas west of the Pecos River has been identified as within range of the historic western subspecies, but other authors consider birds from this area most similar to eastern Cuckoos. Cuckoos are widespread and uncommon to common in central and eastern Texas. (USFWS accessed 10-31-2011).

**Historic:** The species was locally common and widespread in California and Arizona; locally common in a few reaches in New Mexico; common very locally in Oregon and Washington; generally local and uncommon in scattered drainages of the arid and semiarid portions of western Colorado, western Wyoming, Idaho, Nevada, and Utah; and generally uncommon and very local in British Columbia. (USFWS accessed 10-31-2011).

**RANGE WITHIN ARIZONA:** Generally found in southern and central Arizona, and extreme northeast portion of state (Monson and Phillips). Despite losses of riparian habitats from historic levels, the cuckoo is still found in all counties in Arizona. (USFWS accessed 10-31-2011).

**SPECIES BIOLOGY AND POPULATION TRENDS**

**BIOLOGY:** Unlike their European cuckoo counterparts, the Western yellow-billed cuckoo only occasionally parasitizes black-billed cuckoo nests. Breeding often coincides with outbreaks of cicadas and tent caterpillars; they've been known to lay more eggs in good prey-abundant years. Extra eggs may be parasitized in other birds' nests.

**REPRODUCTION:** Both male and female build the nest, often in willow or mesquite thickets, from 4 to 30 ft above ground. Nest is a stick platform, thinly lined with leaves, mesquite and cottonwood strips, grass and catkins with little depression to hold eggs, but well concealed by surrounding foliage (Corman 1990). Clutch of 3-4 unmarked, pale greenish-blue eggs are laid. Incubation lasts 4-11 days with eggs changing color to greenish-yellow; eggs hatch

synchronously. Young are altricial but leave the nest in 7-8 days. If double clutching occurs, the male feeds the first brood of fledglings, while the female feeds the second brood (Erlich et al. 1988). For a full discussion of nesting methods through care of young, see Potter 1980.

**FOOD HABITS:** “Hairy caterpillars also bird eggs, frogs, lizards, ants, beetles, wasps, flies, berries and fruit. Young are fed insect regurgitant” (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

**HABITAT:** Suitable habitats west of the Continental Divide, is limited to narrow, and often widely separated, riparian cottonwood-willow galleries; salt cedar is also used by cuckoos. Dense understory foliage appears to be an important factor in nest site selection, while in California, cottonwood trees are an important foraging habitat. (USFWS accessed 10-31-2011). In addition to cottonwood-willow galleries, cuckoos in Arizona can be found in larger mesquite bosques. They are rarely observed as transients in xeric desert or urban settings (Corman 1992).

**ELEVATION:** Usually found at elevations less than 6,600 feet (2011 m).

**PLANT COMMUNITY:** Mainly mature cottonwood-willow stands, to a lesser extent willows or isolated cottonwoods mixed with tall mesquites (Rosenberg et al. 1990).

**POPULATION TRENDS:** In the western United States, the loss, degradation and fragmentation of riparian habitats, has been identified as the primary factor causing yellow-billed cuckoo declines. Estimates of losses in riparian habitat include 90-95 percent for Arizona, 90 percent for New Mexico, 90-99 percent for California, and more than 70 percent nationwide. (USFWS accessed 10-31-2011). North American Breeding Bird Surveys indicate population declines of 1.6% per year in North America.

Although regional declines have occurred, the yellow-billed cuckoo is relatively common as a breeding bird in much of the eastern United States.

## **SPECIES PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION**

**ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT STATUS:** LT (USDI, FWS, 2014)  
[C Western DPS, USDI, FWS 2001]  
[C USDI, FWS 2002, 2004-2011]

**STATE STATUS:** 1A (AGFD SWAP 2012)  
[WSC, AGFD, WSCA in prep]  
[State Threatened AGFD, TNW 1988]

**OTHER STATUS:** Group 2, full species level (NNDFW, NESL 2005, 2008)  
[Group 3 (NNDFW, NESL 2000)]  
Forest Service Sensitive (USDA Region 3 2000, 2007, 2013)

**MANAGEMENT FACTORS:** Management of riparian habitat known to support cuckoo populations. Riparian habitat has declined up to 90% in Arizona and New Mexico thus negatively affecting this species. Other factors to consider include clearcutting, grazing, and pesticide use in riparian areas.

**PROTECTIVE MEASURES TAKEN:**

**SUGGESTED PROJECTS:** Surveys to determine cuckoo status, use of or dependence on additional areas.

**LAND MANAGEMENT/OWNERSHIP:** **BIA** – Cocopah and San Xavier Reservations, and Tohono O’Odham Nation; **BLM** – Havasu, Kingman, Phoenix, Safford, Tucson and Yuma Field Offices; **BOR** – Phoenix Area; **DOD** – Fort Huachuca Military Reservation and Yuma Proving Ground; **NPS** – Montezuma Castle National Monument; **USFS** – Apache-Sitgreaves, Coconino, Coronado, Prescott and Tonto National Forests; **USFWS** – Bill Williams, Buenos Aires, Cibola, Havasu and San Bernardino National Wildlife Refuges; Arizona State Land Department; Red Rock and Patagonia Lake State Parks; **AGFD** – Alamo Wildlife Area, Base Meridian/Amator Wildlife Area, Mittry Lake, Page Springs Fish Hatchery, Upper Verde River Property and Wenima Riparian Corridor; Pinal County; City of Prescott; **TNC** – Canelo Hills Cienega, Dudleyville-Cooks Lake Preserve, Hassayampa River Preserve, Muleshoe Ranch Preserve, Patagonia-Sonoita Creek Preserve and San Pedro Riparian Preserve; Audubon Research Ranch; Private.

**SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION**

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**ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:**

<b>Revised:</b>	1995-01-19 (DBI)
	1995-03-28 (MJL)
	1998-01-28 (SMS)
	2001-10-05 (SMS)
	2002-08-21 (SMS)
	2010-12-14 (SMS)
	2011-10-31 (SMS)

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Arizona Game and Fish Department. 20XX (= **year of last revision as indicated at end of abstract**). X...X (= **taxon of animal or plant**). Unpublished abstract compiled and edited by the Heritage Data Management System, Arizona Game and Fish Department, Phoenix, AZ. X pp.