

CHECKLIST OF THE BIRDS OF YUMA COUNTY

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ABSTRACT: Yuma County is situated in the southwestern corner of Arizona. The largest city, Yuma, is halfway between San Diego, CA, and Phoenix, AZ. It's a large county, with some 14,294 km² of mostly Sonoran Desert habitat, both lowland and mountainous. Agricultural, urban, and river oases are magnets for birds seeking relief from the vast stretches of desert and add considerably to the bird life in the county. The Colorado River is the most prominent water feature, forming the western boundary of Yuma County. The Gila River bisects the county, flowing (intermittently) from east to west and feeding into the Colorado River just east of Yuma. Riparian corridors along the rivers are among the choice locations to look for migrants and breeding birds. Several lakes and numerous backwaters provide habitat for Rallidae and other marsh-loving species, and for a wide variety of herons, egrets, and waterfowl. This article describes these avian habitats and the process entailed in putting together a [checklist](#) of the birds in the county.



BIRD COMMUNITIES

Sonoran Desert

The lower Sonoran Desert encompasses a huge swath of Yuma County, much of it preserved within Kofa National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), Yuma Proving Grounds, Cabeza Prieta NWR, and the Barry Goldwater Range. Several desert mountain ranges in the western and southern portions of the county provide beautiful hiking and birding opportunities (Figure 1). Signal Peak at 1487 m is the highest point in southwest Arizona, and the county's only breeding Rufous-crowned (*Aimophila ruficeps*) and Black-chinned (*Spizella atrogularis*) Sparrows can be found on the way to the top. Canyons in these mountains ring with the sounds of 3 species of wrens and flashy Scott's Orioles (*Icterus parisorum*). Saguaros (*Carnegiea gigantea*) are used by nesting Elf Owls (*Micrathene whitneyi*) and Gilded Flickers (*Colaptes chrysoides*), and their fruits provide food for a host of breeders and migrants. Washes are good for breeding Phainopepla (*Phainopepla nitens*), Curve-billed (*Toxostoma curvirostre*) and Bendire's (*Toxostoma bendirei*) Thrashers, gnatcatchers, and towhees. A few Gray Vireos (*Vireo vicinior*) and Long-eared Owls (*Asio otus*) winter. Vast low-lying desert flats, dominated by creosote bush (*Larrea tridentate*) and other shrubs, are home to resident LeConte's Thrashers (*Toxostoma lecontei*; Figure 2) and wintering Sagebrush Sparrows (*Artemisiospiza nevadensis*).



Figure 1. Queen Canyon, Kofa NWR, 24 March 2018. Photo by Henry Detwiler



Figure 2. LeConte's Thrasher, 24 March 2018. Photo by Henry Detwiler

Riparian

Historically, the Colorado and Gila rivers were lined with expansive corridors of Fremont's cottonwood (*Populus fremontii*), Gooding's willow (*Salix goodingii*), and impenetrable brush. Unfortunately, most of the forests were harvested long ago for timber and fuel and cleared for agriculture. Time and revegetation projects have recreated some of these riparian jewels. The Yuma East Wetlands, Betty's Kitchen, and Imperial NWR are 3 fine examples, where Gila (*Melanerpes uropygialis*) and Ladder-backed (*Dryobates scalaris*) Woodpeckers, Verdin (*Auriparus flaviceps*), Abert's Towhee (*Melospiza aberti*), Yellow-breasted Chat (*Icteria virens*), and Blue Grosbeak (*Passerina caerulea*) reside. These are productive migrant traps, featuring a host of flycatchers, vireos, warblers, buntings, and grosbeaks every April and May. In the central and eastern portions of the county, stands of mesquite (*Prosopis* spp.) with Black-tailed Gnatcatchers (*Polioptila melanura*), Lucy's Warblers (*Leiothlypis luciae*), and Bell's Vireos (*Vireo bellii*) are found.

Urban

Parks, golf courses, and yards in the city of Yuma and smaller surrounding cities provide lawns and a wide variety of trees. Within the city of Yuma (population 97,000), the West Wetlands boast a bird list exceeding 180 species. Among the cottonwoods, mesquites, palo verdes (*Parkinsonia* spp.), ornamentals, flowers, and bushes, watch for residents such as Ladder-backed Woodpeckers and Crissal Thrasher (*Toxostoma crissale*), breeders such as Costa's Hummingbird (*Calypte costae*) and Blue Grosbeak, and migrants such as Willow Flycatcher (*Empidonax traillii*) and Western Tanager (*Piranga ludoviciana*). A Streak-backed Oriole (*Icterus pustulatus*) that wintered at the Yuma East Wetlands in 2016 was an exceptional rarity.

Lakes and marshland

The Colorado River feeds lakes, marshes, and backwaters in Yuma County. Mitty and Martinez lakes host breeding Western (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*) and Clark's (*Aechmophorus clarkii*) Grebes, Common Gallinule (*Gallinula galeata*), and Cinnamon Teal (*Spatula cyanoptera*). Migration and winter bring gulls, geese, ducks, and loons. Rarities include Tundra Swan (*Cygnus columbianus*), Surf Scoter (*Melanitta perspicillata*), Barrow's Goldeneye (*Bucephala islandica*), Brown (*Sula leucogaster*) and Blue-footed (*Sula nebouxii*) Boobies, and Magnificent Frigatebird (*Fregata magnificens*). Marshes host breeding Black (*Laterallus jamaicensis*), Virginia (*Rallus limicola*), and Ridgway's (*Rallus obsoletus*) Rails, Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*), Common Gallinule, and Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*); these are joined most winters by a few American Bitterns (*Botaurus lentiginosus*) and Swamp Sparrows (*Melospiza georgiana*).

Agriculture

Yuma is heralded as the winter vegetable capital of the world. Millions of acres within the Colorado and Gila river floodplains support farming year-round. It is the desert transformed by water. The agricultural lands south of Yuma and in the Gila River Valley provide an excellent home to an expansive array of wintering raptors. Especially in gopher-rich alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) fields, abundant Ferruginous Hawks (*Buteo regalis*) are joined by Prairie (*Falco mexicanus*) and Peregrine (*Falco peregrinus*) Falcons. Some years see an influx of a few Merlins (*Falco columbarius*), White-tailed Kites (*Elanus leucurus*), Rough-legged Hawks (*Buteo lagopus*), and Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*). Flocks of Mountain Plovers (*Charadrius montanus*; Figure 3) and Long-billed Curlews (*Numenius americanus*) are regular winter visitors. During migration, Swainson's Hawks (*Buteo swainsoni*) are often abundant. When the watering of fallow fields (or newly emergent crops) coincides with shorebird



Figure 3. Mountain Plover, 1 December 2015.
Photo by Henry Detwiler

migration, the results can be spectacular. Franklin's Gulls (*Leucophaeus pipixcan*), Black-bellied (*Pluvialis squatarola*) and Snowy Plovers (*Charadrius nivosus*), Sanderlings (*Calidris alba*), phalaropes, Stilt Sandpipers (*Calidris himantopus*), Marbled Godwits (*Limosa fedoa*), Long-billed Curlews, Whimbrels (*Numenius phaeopus*), ibis, and egrets all come to feast on the bountiful arthropod harvest.

Other enterprises in the county that attract birds include citrus orchards, feedlots, dairies, and date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*) groves. Some have become migrant traps. In 2003 several hectares of shrimp ponds in the Gila Valley north of Dateland became the finest bird oasis the county has seen. Ruff (*Calidris pugnax*), Red Knot (*Calidris canutus*), Sabine's Gull (*Xema sabini*), Red Phalarope (*Phalaropus fulicarius*), Purple Martin (*Progne subis*), and White-rumped Sandpiper (*Calidris fuscicollis*), along with countless waterfowl, shorebirds, terns, swallows, and sparrows regularly showed up for the 3 years these ponds were in operation.

The palm grove, the adjoining RV park, and the school grounds at Dateland form an attractive oasis for birds at the eastern edge of Yuma County. Especially during September and October, this locale can have a great assortment of vagrants. Over the years birders have located amazing finds like Ruddy Ground Dove (*Columbina talpacoti*), Acorn (*Melanerpes formicivorus*) and Lewis's (*Melanerpes lewis*) Woodpeckers, Tropical Kingbird (*Tyrannus melancholicus*), Rufous-backed Robin (*Turdus rufopalliatu*s), Wood Thrush (*Hylocichla mustelina*), Red Crossbill (*Loxia curvirostra*), and Hooded (*Setophaga citrina*) and Kentucky (*Geothlypis formosa*) Warblers.

The Aztec Feedlot and Dairy, also in eastern Yuma County, is the only remaining accessible feedlot. Two ponds have yielded Sabine's Gull, Ruddy Turnstone (*Arenaria interpres*), Ruff, a variety of waterfowl, Townsend's Solitaire (*Myadestes townsendi*), and Rufous-backed Robin. The extensive grass fields (cattle feed) have attracted Dickcissel (*Spiza americana*), Indigo Bunting (*Passerina cyanea*), and Lark Bunting (*Calamospiza melanocorys*). Several times, Black Vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) and Crested Caracara (*Caracara cheriway*) have turned up to partake of carcasses.

WEATHER

Mild winters are the norm in Yuma County, providing warmth and food to the birds. Spring and fall temperatures may rise into the 30s (Celsius), but also yield plenty of buds, fruit, and insect life. Most breeding birds here nest in the spring, before the excessive summer heat. Summer temperatures regularly approach 46°C. During the monsoon season in July and August postbreeding visitors often disperse from Mexico and can be found at lakes and rivers in the county. Over the years these have included Brown and Blue-footed Boobies, Wood Stork (*Mycteria americana*), Reddish Egret (*Egretta rufescens*), Roseate Spoonbill (*Platalea ajaja*), and Elegant Tern (*Thalasseus elegans*). This is the time to watch for Yuma County's first record for Yellow-footed Gull (*Larus livens*)!

Hurricane Nora in 1997 and Hurricane Newton in 2016 charged up from the Gulf of California and deposited hapless pelagic vagrants over Arizona. A good percentage of the petrels and shearwaters seen on Lake Havasu after Hurricane Nora struck probably passed over Yuma County—so we'll be ready for the next one. Other, far less violent storms were responsible for blowing in the Sooty Shearwater (*Ardenna grisea*) and Hawaiian Petrel (*Pterodroma sandwichensis*; Figure 4) discussed under "Outstanding Records."



Figure 4. Hawaiian Petrel, 28 August 2013. Photo by Thomas Knapp

BUILDING A CHECKLIST

The foundation for this current checklist was an older one I created for Bird-finding in Yuma County, Arizona (Detwiler 2013). However, that list was neither comprehensive nor historical. It was also out of date—since 2013 county birders have added some outstanding species to the list. The primary source for historical records (1894-1989) has been Birds of the Lower Colorado River Valley (Rosenberg et al. 1991). Newer records were found in eBird online (eBird 2020) and in Arizona Bird Committee (ABC) reports, published in *Western Birds* and on the ABC website. I scoured the Arizona Field Ornithologists (AZFO) Seasonal Reports (AZFO 2016) and the North American Birds (NAB) online archives (NAB 2008) for Yuma County records, searching for keywords, such as “Yuma,” “Mittry,” “Martinez,” and “Laguna Dam.” I had hoped to use our Christmas Bird Count data, before remembering that half of our count circle lies within Imperial County, California.

Prior to 1983 Yuma County extended north to the Bill Williams River and encompassed 25,959 km². In 1983 voters approved a measure to split off the northern half of Yuma County into a new county—La Paz. Several of the checklists currently available for Yuma County still include birds seen only in what is now La Paz County; these birds have been deleted from this current checklist.

A few rare birds may have been seen in Yuma County for which there is no documentation (written or photo). These hypothetical birds are:

- Broad-tailed Hummingbird (*Selasphorus platycercus*) – Reported via eBird in the Yuma West Wetlands in April 2006
- Cordilleran Flycatcher (*Empidonax occidentalis*) – Seen and heard by me in the Kofa NWR in the 1990s but not documented
- Plain Titmouse (*Parus inornatus*) – Reported at a feeder in Yuma in April 1988 (Rosenberg et al. 1991). In 1996 this species was split by the AOU into Oak Titmouse (*Baeolophus inornatus*) and Juniper Titmouse (*Baeolophus ridgwayi*; AOU 1997). Neither species is migratory nor prone to postbreeding disbursement. Oak Titmice in the Laguna Mountains, in San Diego County, CA, are approximately 170 km west of Yuma, whereas Juniper Titmouse in the Hualapai Mountains, in Mohave County, AZ, are approximately 230 km to the north. Arguments can be made for either species.
- Red-faced Warbler (*Cardellina rubrifrons*) – Apparently mist-netted at Imperial NWR in April 1975 (Rosenberg et al. 1991)

These 4 species are not included on the current checklist.

As of May 2020, 393 bird species grace the Yuma County checklist. The list follows the American Ornithological Society order (Chesser et al. 2019).

STATUS AND BREEDING CODES

Status codes can generate much discussion. Perhaps it's because so many definitions of the word “Common” or “Rare” are used. Or maybe because the codes appear to be quite subjective on many lists. Add to this that a bird's status may change from year to year (depending on weather, food availability, habitat, breeding success, etc.), and may even appear to change from week to week. Another consideration: status codes can be viewed from differing perspectives. To a biologist, “Common” may mean that the bird is commonly occurring; it is widely distributed in the county and present in good numbers. To a lister, “Common” may mean that the bird is commonly seen; one can easily find the bird

provided one looks for it in the appropriate place and at the appropriate time. Usually these two viewpoints mesh nicely, commonly occurring birds are commonly seen. But with some species, this is not the case. Birders often go away disappointed when looking for “common” Greater Roadrunners (*Geococcyx californianus*). On the other hand, birders looking for “rare” Black Rails often go home satisfied.

For this checklist, I use the following definitions:

- **Common** birds are widely distributed and present in good numbers throughout the county. These include species like Gambel’s Quail (*Callipepla gambelii*) and Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*), which are likely to be found on most birding trips. It also includes Greater Roadrunner and Crissal Thrasher, which may be found on fewer than half of birding trips.
- **Fairly Common** birds are also widely distributed, and usually present in decent numbers. But they are neither as widely distributed nor as well represented as Common birds and are consequently more difficult to locate. Fairly Common birds are expected on 50% of outings. Examples are Inca Dove (*Columbina inca*) and American Pipit (*Anthus rubescens*). The distinction between Common and Fairly Common is a subjective call.
- **Uncommon** birds are even less plentiful and may not be well distributed at all. They are, however, possible to find with some effort, especially in the proper habitat and the best times of the year. These Uncommon birds may be found on 25% of outings. Birds in this category include many less plentiful migrants, such as Cassin’s Vireo (*Vireo cassinii*) and Bank Swallow (*Riparia riparia*).
- **Rare** birds are not always present annually or may occupy a limited range or habitat. Depending on their numbers and habitat, these birds may be listed as Threatened or Endangered by federal agencies. Being rare, however, does not necessarily mean that they are difficult to see or hear. Birds in this category include Black Rail and American Goldfinch (*Spinus tristis*).

The status codes are based on searching for target birds in the proper habitat. For example, Rock Pigeons (*Columba livia*) are often abundant in cities, but absent from the desert. Similarly, Black-tailed Gnatcatchers are common in many desert washes, but rare in most towns.

Several further status codes are used to describe the occurrence of rarer species.

- **Irregular** birds may visit Yuma County every few years during the fall and winter season, or perhaps only once a decade. There is no set schedule. Some, like finches and nuthatches, may move down to the deserts in search of food if the pinecone crop or other typical food resources are limited at higher elevations (where they would normally winter). Irruptions occurring in 1955, 1960, and 1978 accounted for single Steller’s (*Cyanocitta stelleri*) and Pinyon (*Gymnorhinus cyanocephalus*) Jays, and 15 Woodhouse’s Scrub-Jays (*Aphelocoma woodhouseii*; Rosenberg et al. 1991).
- **Casual** birds are not expected in the county on an annual basis. Yuma County is not part of their breeding or wintering grounds, and it is not on their typical migratory path. They may arrive as a result of wrong-way migration or be blown in by storms. Some, such as Black-and-white Warbler (*Mniotilta varia*) and American Redstart (*Setophaga ruticilla*), occur regularly enough in Arizona that one or more winds up in Yuma County almost every winter. If the species has occurred in the county at least 6 times, it is considered Casual.
- **Accidental** birds are even rarer, having been recorded in the county fewer than 6 times. These include birds that may never be seen in the county again, such as the 2013 Hawaiian Petrel (Rosenberg et al. 2017). They also include Black Scoter (*Melanitta americana*), which over time may be upgraded to Casual status.

If a species currently breeds in Yuma County or has bred here in the past, this status is indicated with an “n” for nesting (or nested). Most breeding assessments are based on surveys by the Arizona Breeding Bird Atlas teams between 1993 and 2000 (Corman and Wise 2005). Additional breeding data came from reports in American Birds, National Audubon Society Field Notes, and North American Birds (NAB 2008), personal communications, and from personal observations. This list identifies 104 birds that are known to have nested in Yuma County.

INTERESTING AND OUTSTANDING RECORDS

There have been dozens of exceptional bird sightings in Yuma County over the years. Some have strayed from Mexico, a few from California, and others from central and eastern United States. A few vagrants have been pelagic. Here is a small sample:

- In April 1988 a Plain Titmouse was recorded in Yuma and reported in American Birds. Eight years later this species was split into Oak Titmouse and Juniper Titmouse. Neither is prone to wander, but the Laguna Mountains seems to be the likely origin for this record based on distance to Yuma, making it most likely an Oak Titmouse.
- In February 2000, a live Red-billed Tropicbird (*Phaethon rubricauda*) was picked up in Yuma (Rosenberg et al. 2007). Undoubtedly it had been carried there by a Pacific storm that passed through the previous day. Attempts to rehabilitate the bird failed.
- Remarkably, 2 records of Laysan Albatross (*Phoebastria immutabilis*) come from Yuma within the span of 8 years (Rosenberg and Witzeman 1998). The first was found on 14 May 1981 and taken for rehabilitation to Sea World in San Diego; it was later released into the wild. The second was found dead on 18 July 1988 along an irrigation canal east of Yuma. There had been no recent storm activity.
- In January 2001, a Thick-billed Kingbird (*Tyrannus crassirostris*) was found along the Yuma Main Drain. More remarkably, it returned for the next 8 winter seasons!
- From 11 January to 20 February 2007 a Couch’s Kingbird (*Tyrannus couchii*) was seen by many observers at Tacna. It was the first record for Arizona (Rosenberg et al. 2011).
- In August 2013 a dead and partially mummified Hawaiian Petrel was found in a parking lot in downtown Yuma (Rosenberg et al. 2017). It was the first state record, likely the first inland record of this species for North America, and probably the first specimen for the lower 48 states. It was likely blown in by southerly storm winds earlier in the month. The same system almost certainly blew in the county’s first Sooty Shearwater to Mittry Lake, and a Brown Booby to the Laguna Division Conservation Area.
- In August 2016 a California Scrub-Jay (*Aphelocoma californica*) was spotted feeding on peanuts at a feeding station in the Hettema neighborhood, in the city of Yuma. The bird visited frequently for the first several months, allowing many birders to see and photograph this first Arizona record (Rosenberg et al. 2019). It then became an irregular visitor, and finally, after May 2017 (eBird) was not seen again. The ABC noted that despite this being a nonmigratory bird, it has been reported twice at the Salton Sea, at the Mohave Desert, in Idaho, and in Montana.
- On 13 May 2020, a Black Turnstone (*Arenaria melanocephala*; Figure 5) was discovered in a flooded field northeast of Yuma. It remained only one day. If accepted by the Arizona Bird Committee, it will be the first record for Yuma County and only the second for Arizona.



Figure 5. Black Turnstone, 13 May 2020. Photo by Henry Detwiler

Yuma County's most iconic species is the Black Rail (Figure 6). It is often heard but rarely seen. I've often had them calling at my feet with not so much as a glimpse. Both the United States Fish and Wildlife Service and the Arizona Game and Fish Department lists this rail as a "Species of Special Concern." The California Fish and Game Commission lists the rail as a "State Threatened Species." Black Rails breed in marshes and backwaters along the Colorado River. The unique habitat requirements and vocalizations make them relatively easy to locate and study. Recent annual surveys have averaged approximately 65 Black Rails in Yuma County (AZGFD unpub. data). Tiny birds, they prefer to feed and breed in water that averages 2.5 cm in depth (Flores and Eddleman 1991). Remediation projects and management practices by the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) appear to be keeping the population healthy.



Figure 6. Black Rail, 7 June 2018. Photo by Henry Detwiler.

TRENDS

- Before the riparian corridors were cut and the land converted to agriculture, Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*), Willow Flycatcher, Harris's Hawk, and Yellow Warbler (*Setophaga petechia*) bred in the county. A Harris's Hawk (*Parabuteo unicinctus*) reintroduction program begun by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) in 1978 (Rosenberg et al. 1991) was initially successful, and then failed. With revegetation projects along the Colorado River taking hold, Yellow Warbler is again a breeding bird, and both Yellow-billed Cuckoo and the "Southwestern" Willow Flycatcher may do so in the near future.
- Inca Dove was common in our Yuma yard in 2002; now we're lucky to hear a few per year. Similar situations have occurred in our parks, as they have in certain Phoenix (Warren et al. 2019) and Tucson (Porier 2019) neighborhoods. Fortunately, they remain common in several rural pockets in the county. However, this species is at the northern portion of its range and has natural fluctuations in population densities.
- Red-shouldered Hawk (*Buteo lineatus*), on the other hand, has increased in numbers in Yuma over the past 10 years. At least one pair breeds in our neighborhood, and I suspect breeding in several other parts of the city.
- Also increasing is the now ubiquitous Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*). This species was accidentally released in the Bahamas in 1974, and from there wandered to Florida. First reported in Arizona in 2000, by 2002 it had colonized its way to Yuma County (Jenness 2004).
- Future storms passing over either the Pacific Ocean or the Gulf of California, and then crossing into Yuma County, are likely to drop new species into our laps.

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