

SPECIES OF THE MONTH**YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO****JULY 2025**

Populations of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) have undergone a substantial nationwide decline in recent decades. The primary reason for the decline of the western United States population is that in the region's arid climate, the species is mostly restricted to densely vegetated riparian corridors and Madrean Sky Islands drainages. In the last century and a half, much of this habitat has been lost or degraded from streamflow and groundwater reductions, grazing pressure, and habitat conversion to farmland and housing. As a result, the western population of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo was listed as threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act in 2014 with critical habitat designated in 2021. The Arizona Game and Fish Department has recognized it as a Species of Greatest Conservation Need in Arizona.

Historically, riparian forests of cottonwood and willow stretched for many miles along the lower Colorado, Gila, Salt, Verde, Santa Cruz, and San Pedro river valleys, and the Yellow-billed Cuckoo was considered a common breeding species. Although much of its riparian habitat has been lost, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo continues to be observed locally in reduced numbers in lowland drainages. Recent studies, conducted by university researchers, national park and forest biologists, and volunteers, coordinated by the Important Birding Areas, have confirmed that breeding along mountain drainages in southeastern Arizona is more frequent than previously known. These drainages have a higher proportion of oak, ash, walnut, sycamore, alder, and other species, and are highly productive during the monsoon season.

Yellow-billed Cuckoos winter exclusively in South America and migrate north at night in the spring to their nesting grounds throughout the United States. In Arizona, they are one of the latest migrants to arrive on their breeding territories. Although a few arrive in late May, most do not arrive until mid-June. This late arrival likely corresponds to the hatching of large insects, such as butterfly and moth larvae, cicadas, grasshoppers, katydids, etc., which occurs during the summer monsoon season. Once begun, the breeding cycle is unusually rapid and requires only 17 days from egg-laying to fledging of young. Bursting feather sheaths allow nestlings to become fully feathered within 2 hours. Nesting continues through August and into September.

This cuckoo is fairly long and slim. The mostly yellow bill is approximately the same length as the head and is curved downward. The bird has a flat head and very long tail with white spots. Observers often hear the cuckoo's guttural, knocking song or its dove-like cooing before they see it.



Yellow-billed Cuckoo, Santa Cruz County, 16 August 2024. Photo by Cathy Beck