GILA WOODPECKER NESTING IN NORTHERN BAJA CALIFORNIA

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The range of the Gila Woodpecker (*Melanerpes uropygialis*) coincides closely with the distribution of the Saguaro (*Carnegiea gigantea*) and Cardon (*Pachycereus pringlei*) cacti of the Sonoran Desert (Robbins et al. 1983). The woodpeckers' nest cavities are usually excavated in the trunks and branches of these giant succulents and to a lesser extent in cottonwoods (*Populus*), mesquite (*Prosopis*), and willow (*Salix*) (Bent 1939). The range of the Cardon extends to within 130 km of the U.S. border (Wiggins 1980) and presumably Gila Woodpeckers nest in this region. There is one record of a Gila Woodpecker from "Las Palmas Canyon" in extreme northern Baja, beyond the range of the Cardon (Grinnell 1928). Unfortunately, the precise location of "Las Palmas Canyon" is unknown and could be any of several canyons draining the eastern slopes of the Sierra Juarez that harbor palms.

On 15 May 1984 Jim Toenjes and I observed two pairs of Gila Woodpeckers 44 km south of the U.S. border, in Tajo Canyon (32° 15′ 41″ N, 115° 51′ 25″ W), Baja California Norte. Both pairs were calling vigorously. No Cardon cacti were in the canyon or on the surrounding hillsides. The only likely nesting sites were in dead standing Desert Fan Palms (*Washingtonia filifera*) and Blue Fan Palms (*Erythea armata*), of which there were 14 and 6, respectively, in the eastern 5 km of the canyon. We did not, however, observe any active nests. Nearly 400 living palms with trunks exceeding 2 m in height existed in this portion of the canyon.

The following day I visited Blue Palm Canyon (32° 22′ 31″ N, 115° 50′ 19″ W), also in Baja California Norte, approximately 24 km south of the U.S. border. Again, no Cardon cacti were in the vicinity, and the only large trees were Desert and Blue Fan Palms. I observed a single pair of Gila Woodpeckers, both of which were actively feeding young in a nest cavity in a dead Blue Fan Palm. The oasis in this canyon had 129 large palms, three of which were dead but still erect.

Approximately 122 Desert Fan Palm oases exist in the U.S. yet Gila Woodpeckers are not known to nest in any of these oases. One significant difference between the palm oases of northern Baja and southern California is the absence of Blue Fan Palms in the U.S. groves, a palm species that reaches its northern limit in Blue Palm Canyon. My studies of palm oases suggest that *E. armata* may require some precipitation in summer, which decreases inversely with latitude in this region. Perhaps a lack of suitable nesting sites, i.e., Blue Fan Palms, in conjunction with insufficient summer rain and resultant decrease in food resources prevents the Gila Woodpecker from establishing itself at palm oases in the U.S. I note also that European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) frequently nest in many U.S. palm oases, most of which are located within 50 km of urban areas. I have yet to see a starling in any of the palm oases of Baja California Norte, all but one of which are located more than 75 km from the nearest town or city.

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Accepted 20 February 1987