

STATUS OF THE YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO IN IDAHO

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The Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) is a rare bird in the western United States, with an estimated population of 475 to 675 pairs by the late 1980s (Laymon and Halterman 1987). Its historic range has contracted dramatically, particularly in the Pacific Northwest, where it disappeared as a breeding bird from British Columbia, Washington, and Oregon between the 1920s and 1950s (Roberson 1980, Gaines and Laymon 1984, Marshall et al. 1996). It is under review for listing as a threatened or endangered species by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and it is listed as endangered, threatened, or a species of concern by state wildlife agencies in California, Oregon, and Arizona (Hughes 1999).

In Idaho, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo has been a rare breeder (Larrison et al. 1967, Burleigh 1972, Taylor and Trost 1987, Stephens and Sturts 1991), and currently the species is considered critically imperiled (Groves et al. 1997). In a recent North American summary of its status and distribution (Hughes 1999), Idaho was represented by question marks and inaccurate map distributions, with no specific information about its status. A priority for ensuring its survival is determining its numbers and locations (Laymon and Halterman 1987, Hughes 1999). Here I summarize known records of this species in Idaho and assess its current status in the state.

In northern and central Idaho there are only four records of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, scattered over the last century. These include one collected at Coeur d'Alene, Kootenai Co. (Merrill 1897), sightings at Whitebird Hill, Idaho Co. (Larrison et al. 1967), and Kendrick, Latah Co. (Weber and Larrison 1977), and a record of a migrant from somewhere in central Idaho (Stephens and Sturts 1991).

In southwestern Idaho the Yellow-billed Cuckoo has historically been considered a "rare summer visitor and breeder, perhaps erratic, in the western part of the Snake River Valley" (Larrison et al. 1967). Sites of records in the last quarter century include Battle Creek and Crane Creek Reservoir, Owyhee Co. (Svingen 1996, T. Rich pers. comm.), an island in the Snake River, Fort Boise Wildlife Management Area (W.M.A.), and Lake Lowell, Canyon Co. (Rogers 1978, Taylor and Trost 1987, J. Gatchette pers. comm., G. Kaltenecker pers. comm.), Prairie, Elmore Co. (Rogers 1979), Swan Falls Dam, Ada Co. (Rogers 1985), Hayspur Fish Hatchery, Blaine Co. (Svingen 1997), and the Twin Falls area, Twin Falls Co. (Rogers 1984). Yellow-billed Cuckoos have not been recorded more than once at any of these locations, except for the single records from the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s at Lake Lowell.

Yellow-billed Cuckoos have occurred most frequently and consistently in cottonwood (*Populus* sp.) forests with thick understory along the Snake River in southeastern Idaho (Groves et al. 1997). At Rupert, Minidoka Co., occupied nests were found early in the century (Davis 1935), and there were numerous summer records in the 1980s (Rogers 1984, 1985, 1988). Cuckoos have been found in most years since the early 1980s around American Falls Reservoir, particularly on the stretch of Snake River flowing into the reservoir (Taylor and Trost 1987, Taylor et al. 1997, 1999, C. H. Trost pers. comm., pers. obs.). On the main Snake River above Blackfoot, individual records have come from Shelly (Taylor et al. 1997) and Firth (Rogers 1986), Bingham Co. At Cartier W.M.A., Madison Co., up to a dozen pairs nested in the early 1980s (Taylor and Trost 1987), and the species was reported at least until 1990 (Rogers 1991). Saab (1999) found a few pairs and nests in the Twin Bridges area near Ririe, Jefferson Co., but none upstream to Palisades Dam despite extensive surveying in the 1990s (V. Saab pers. comm.). Away from the Snake River there have been recent records of individuals from Mud Lake and Camas National Wildlife Refuge, Jefferson Co. (Svingen 1996, 1997).

NOTES

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo appears to be hanging on precariously in Idaho, primarily along the Snake River in the southeastern part of the state. There are probably not more than a few dozen pairs breeding annually in the state, and quite possibly fewer than ten pairs. Because of the paucity of early observers (Burleigh 1972, Taylor and Trost 1987) and the difficulty of observing the species, it is difficult to determine the historical abundance of cuckoos. However, it is almost certain that the species has declined from historical levels, as it has in other western states (Laymon and Halterman 1987, Marshall et al. 1996, Hughes 1999). The Yellow-billed Cuckoo should be considered one of the most endangered bird species in Idaho. It could easily become extirpated from the state in the near future.

Most Idaho Yellow-billed Cuckoo records have come from large stands of mature cottonwoods with a well-developed understory (Groves et al. 1997, Saab 1999, pers obs.), the preferred habitat in California (Laymon and Halterman 1987) and Oregon (Marshall et al. 1996). Little ecological research has been conducted on the riparian vegetation of the Snake and other rivers in Idaho, but much of this vegetation has undergone modification and deterioration (Dixon and Johnson 1999). On an 83-mile stretch of the middle Snake River, riparian woodland has increased since the 1930s but two thirds of these woodlands are composed of exotic tamarisk (*Tamarix* spp.) and Russian olive (*Elaeagnus angustifolia*), with willows (*Salix* spp.) the dominate native, and cottonwoods uncommon (Dixon and Johnson 1999). Restoration of large areas of riparian cottonwood with a thick understory, particularly willow (Marshall et al. 1996), would probably benefit the Yellow-billed Cuckoo in Idaho greatly.

I thank C. Groves, G. Kaltenecker, T. Rich, A. Rockledge, V. Saab, D. Trochell, and C. Trost for providing records and insights into Yellow-billed Cuckoo status in Idaho. M. Taylor helped edit this paper. T. Rich and S. A. Laymon reviewed the manuscript.

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Accepted 18 October 2000