

# Arizona Breeding Bird Atlas

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# Yellow-billed Cuckoo

by Troy E. Corman

*Coccyzus americanus*

From deep within its high, leafy domain, the distinctive stuttering call of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo is heard much more often than the bird is actually seen. When perched, it frequently remains motionless, except for the very slow, mechanical tilting of the head as it carefully inspects the leaves and upper branches for its favorite prey.

## HABITAT

In the arid Southwest, Yellow-billed Cuckoos are primarily restricted to densely wooded rivers and streams and damp thickets with relatively high humidity. Even though this habitat is much reduced in Arizona, these cuckoos can still be found locally along lowland drainages where stands of multistructured native riparian woodlands occur. Atlasers reported 68 percent of Yellow-billed Cuckoo observations from lowland riparian woodlands, often containing a variable combination of Fremont cottonwood, willow, velvet ash, Arizona walnut, mesquite, and tamarisk ( $n = 132$ ). In southeastern Arizona, these cuckoos are also found nesting along intermittent drainages with dense stands of velvet mesquite and netleaf hackberry. Yellow-billed Cuckoos are infrequently encountered along higher and narrower mountain drainages where Arizona sycamore or Arizona alder become the dominant riparian trees, although approximately 18 percent of records were from lower reaches of this habitat, where cottonwoods are also commonly present.

## BREEDING

In Arizona, Yellow-billed Cuckoos are the latest "spring" migrants to arrive on their breeding grounds. A few individuals arrive in mid- to late May, but the majority does not arrive until mid-June, with late migrants occasionally straggling into

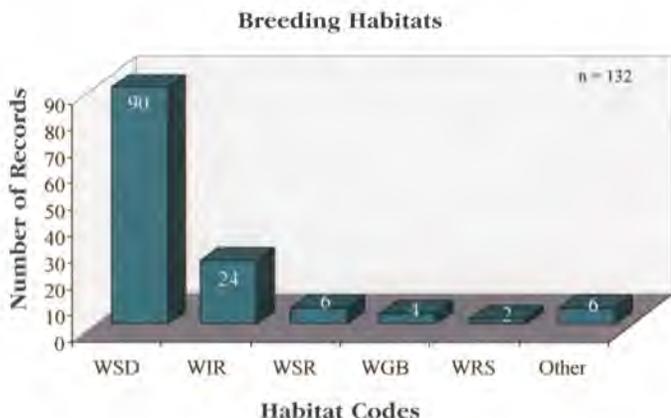


RICH AND NORA BOWERS

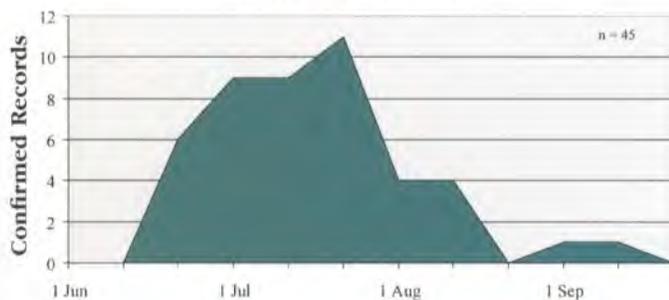
early July. Atlasers noted an occupied nest on 21 June and a nest with eggs by 25 June. In Arizona, the earliest egg date reported is 15 June (Bent 1940); however, peak-nesting activity typically occurs from July to early August (Howe 1986; Corman and Magill 2000). Nesting activities continue through August and frequently into September, especially in southeastern Arizona. This is likely in response to the increased food resources and higher humidity associated with the seasonal late summer rains. In Arizona, occupied nests have been reported as late as 26 August; the latest confirmed report during the atlas was an adult observed carrying a fecal sac on 18 September, suggesting a nest with young nearby. Yellow-billed Cuckoos are occasionally noted feeding young through the end of September in Arizona. Late breeding activity was undoubtedly missed as most atlas surveys ended by mid- to late August, when fall migration typically begins for this species. Few Yellow-billed Cuckoos remain in Arizona after mid-September, with stragglers casually reported into mid-October.

In Arizona, most Yellow-billed Cuckoo nests have been located in willows, but nests have also been discovered in cottonwood, sycamore, alder, mesquite, hackberry, and tamarisk. The nest is frequently placed on horizontal limbs and branches of trees or taller shrubs and usually concealed by surrounding foliage (Hughes 1999). In Arizona, nests range in height from 4 to 55 ft (1.2–16.8 m), although the average is approximately 19 ft (5.8 m) above the ground (Corman and Magill 2000; Halterman 2001). Nests are constructed by both adults and are loose, flat platforms of dry twigs and often lined with bark and leaves (Hughes 1999).

Yellow-billed Cuckoo clutches typically consist of 2–3 (range 1–5) eggs, and both parents share incubation duties of 9–11 days (Hamilton and Hamilton 1965; Potter 1980). The young hatch asynchronously and are in the nest for an extremely short period, averaging only 7–9 days (Potter 1980). Cuckoo young are unable to fly at nest departure, but they are quite capable of awkwardly clambering over limbs and leafy branches in pursuit of adults with food. The young have often left the nest vicinity after only a day (Potter 1980) and obtain the ability of sustained flight when approximately 3 weeks of age (Hughes 1999). Yellow-billed Cuckoos typically produce one or two broods per



### Breeding Phenology



season, although many late nests may simply pertain to efforts following failed earlier attempts. This may be especially true for western populations whose nesting season is limited to only 2–3 months.

### DISTRIBUTION AND STATUS

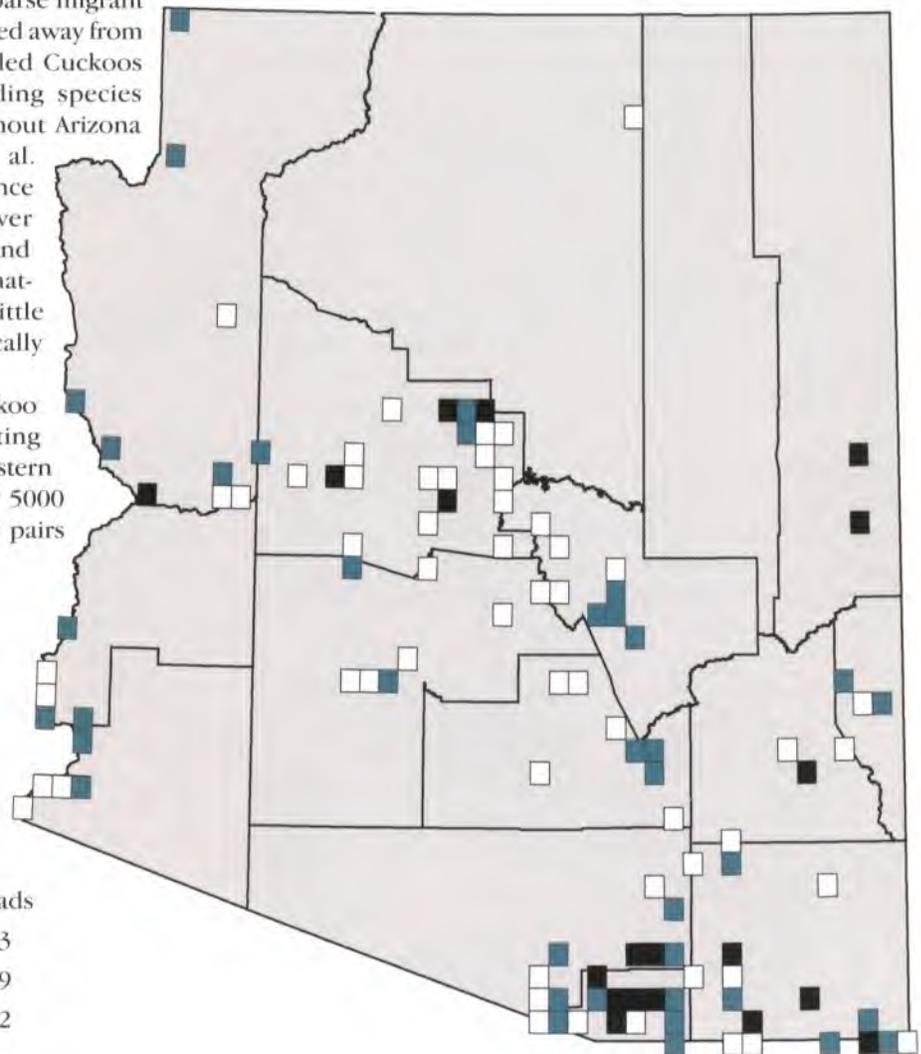
Yellow-billed Cuckoos are neotropical migrants that winter primarily in South America (American Ornithologists' Union 1998). These cuckoos breed throughout the eastern and central United States and southern edge of Canada, south to northern Mexico, and locally west of the Continental Divide to California. It is a sparse migrant throughout Arizona, but it is rarely observed away from riparian habitats. Historically, Yellow-billed Cuckoos were often listed as a common breeding species within extensive riparian forests throughout Arizona (Swarth 1905; Visher 1910; Phillips et al. 1964). These often dense woodlands once extended for many miles along the lower Colorado, Gila, Salt, Verde, Santa Cruz, and San Pedro river valleys. However, these natural plant communities today bear little resemblance to what they were historically (Rosenberg et al. 1991).

Atlases and specific Yellow-billed Cuckoo surveyors encountered these birds nesting primarily in western, central, and southeastern Arizona along perennial drainages below 5000 ft (1524 m) elevation. Conversely, a few pairs

were found nesting to 6950 ft (2118 m) along the upper Little Colorado River near Springerville and even in exotic shade trees within the community of St. Johns, Apache County. Because of the general lack of appropriate nesting habitat in northeastern Arizona, atlas data concur with Phillips et al. (1964) that this species is very local there.

Atlas and specific surveys revealed that Yellow-billed Cuckoos could still be found along most of the twenty-five drainages where they were reported historically. Unfortunately, however, just like their preferred habitat, they are much more local in distribution. The highest concentrations in the state were found along the Agua Fria, San Pedro, upper Santa Cruz, and Verde River drainages and Cienega and Sonoita creeks.

Like many species that depend on riparian habitat in the arid southwest, the breeding distribution and number of Yellow-billed Cuckoos has declined significantly in the past eighty years. In Arizona, these population declines have been most dramatic along the Gila and lower Colorado rivers. Declines are primarily caused by native riparian habitat loss through degradation and fragmentation from decreased water tables, replacement by nonnative trees, inappropriate grazing practices, and poor river management. There is still much to learn about specific habitat requirements of this unique riparian species in Arizona.



**Yellow-billed Cuckoo Breeding Evidence Reported in 50 (3%) of 1834 priority blocks**

|             | Blocks   | Quads |
|-------------|----------|-------|
| □ Possible  | 21 (42%) | 53    |
| ■ Probable  | 19 (38%) | 39    |
| ■ Confirmed | 10 (20%) | 22    |