

SECTION 7 GUIDELINES - Snake River Basin Office
Yellow-billed Cuckoo (candidate)
(*Coccyzus americanus*)

I. BACKGROUND

Legal Status

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) received a petition dated February 2, 1998, to list the **yellow-billed cuckoo** (*Coccyzus americanus*) as an endangered species. The petition was submitted by the Center for Biological Diversity on behalf of 22 groups in California, Arizona, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, and Nevada. The 90-day finding dated February 17, 2000 (65 FR 33), found that the petition presented substantial scientific and commercial information to indicate that the listing of the **yellow-billed cuckoo** may be warranted. The Service has initiated a status review to determine if the petitioned action is warranted. To ensure that the review is comprehensive, the Service is soliciting information and data regarding this species. The final rule, dated October 30, 2001, lists the Western Distinct Population Segment (DPS) as warranted but precluded.

Species Description

The yellow-billed cuckoo is a medium-sized bird of about 30 centimeters (12 inches) in length, and weighing about 60 grams (2 ounces). The species has a slender, long-tailed profile, with a fairly stout and slightly down-curved bill, which is blue-black with yellow on the basal half of the lower mandible (bill). The tail feathers are boldly patterned with black and white below.

The legs are short and bluish-gray, and adults have a narrow, yellow eye ring. Juveniles resemble adults, except the tail patterning is less distinct, and the lower bill may have little or no yellow. The feet are distinctive, with two toes pointing forward and two toes pointing back (zygodactyl foot). Males and females differ slightly. Males tend to have a slightly larger bill, and the white in the tail tends to form oval spots, whereas in females the white spots tend to be connected and less distinct (Hughes 1999).

The western DPS includes the area west of the crest of the Rocky Mountains.

Life History

Yellow-billed cuckoos breed in large blocks of riparian habitats (particularly woodlands with cottonwoods and willows). They are low/shrub nesting birds, and produce an open cup nest. Clutch size is generally 2-4 eggs. 9-11 days are required for incubation, and 7-8 days for fledging of young. Yellow-billed cuckoos primarily feed on large insects such as caterpillars and grasshoppers (Nolan and Thompson 1975, Laymon 1980), but have also been known to eat small frogs and arboreal lizards (Voous 1955, Hamilton and Hamilton 1965). Nesting peaks (mid-June through August) may be influenced by an abundance of caterpillars and other prey.

Yellow-billed cuckoos are neotropical migrants, overwintering from Columbia and Venezuela, south to northern Argentina. Current bird band return data are insufficient to determine migration or wintering patterns.

Distribution and Population Status

Historically, the yellow-billed cuckoo was widespread and common in California and Arizona, locally common in a few river reaches in New Mexico, common very locally in Oregon and Washington, and generally scattered in drainages of the arid and semiarid portions of western Colorado, western Wyoming, Idaho, Nevada, and Utah.

In Idaho, the species was considered a rare and local summer resident. In southwestern Idaho, the yellow-billed cuckoo has been considered a rare, sometimes erratic, visitor and breeder in the Snake River valley. All sighting information within the state of Idaho has occurred in southwestern Idaho, mostly in the Snake River Valley. It is thought that the species could easily become extirpated from the State of Idaho in the near future, although the available information is inadequate to judge population or distributional trends. Detailed information about the distribution and status of the yellow-billed cuckoo throughout the western United States can be found in the 2001 Proposed Rule (66 FR 143).

Current data suggests that the yellow-billed cuckoo's range and population numbers have declined substantially across much of the western United States over the past 50 years. Analysis of population trends is difficult because quantitative data, including historical population estimates, are lacking. However, historic and recent data are sufficient to allow an evaluation of changes in the species' range in the western United States.

Habitat Needs

Yellow-billed cuckoos in the western United States appear to require large blocks of riparian habitat for nesting (particularly riparian woodlands including cottonwoods and willows). Home ranges of nesting birds may include 10 hectares (25 acres) or more of riparian habitat. Nesting west of the Continental Divide occurs almost exclusively close to water, possibly due to humidity requirements for successful hatching and rearing of young.

Threats

The petition identifies habitat loss, overgrazing, tamarisk invasion of riparian areas, river management, logging, and pesticides as causes of decline. These factors are consistent with loss, degradation, and fragmentation of riparian habitat as the primary factor causing yellow-billed cuckoo declines in the western United States. Estimates of riparian habitat losses include 90-95 percent for Arizona, 90 percent for New Mexico, 90-99 percent for California, and more than 70 percent nationwide (Noss et al. 1995; Ohmart 1994). Much of the remaining habitat is in poor condition and heavily affected by human use (U.S. Department of Interior 1994; Almand and Krohn 1978). Local extinctions and low colonization rates have also been identified as factors causing population declines, and pesticides and loss of wintering habitat as potential factors (Hughes 1999).

II. GUIDELINES – Protocol for Evaluating Project Effects

Yellow-billed cuckoos are classified as a Candidate species under the Act. Federal action agencies are not required to consult with the Service pursuant to Section 7(a)2 of the Act. However, they are encouraged to consider Candidate species in their project planning under Section 7(a)(1).

In areas of known occurrence:

- Activities should avoid fragmentation, degradation, or destruction of riparian habitat known to support yellow-billed cuckoos. Manage for large continuous blocks of habitat in conjunction with removal of competing exotic plant species.
- Major activities should avoid work in occupied riparian areas during the breeding season (from May through August).
- Eliminate pesticide spraying adjacent to riparian areas.
- Enhance and improve multi-tiered, mid-upperstory, lowland riparian habitat.
- Riparian areas in permitted cattle or sheep grazing allotments should be fenced to eliminate trampling and consumption of riparian vegetation.
- Riparian vegetation should be conserved by river flow management (promotion of natural flow regimes), stream bank protection, and protection from competitive exotic plants.
- Develop buffer zones between riparian habitats and adjacent development.

Literature Cited

Gaines, D. and S.A. Laymon. 1984. Decline, status and preservation of the yellow-billed cuckoo in California. *Western Birds* 15: 49-80.

Hughes, J.M. 1999. Yellow-billed Cuckoo, in *The Birds of North America* (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.), no. 418. Birds of North America, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Taylor, D.M. 2000. Status of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo in Idaho. *Western Birds* 31:252-254.

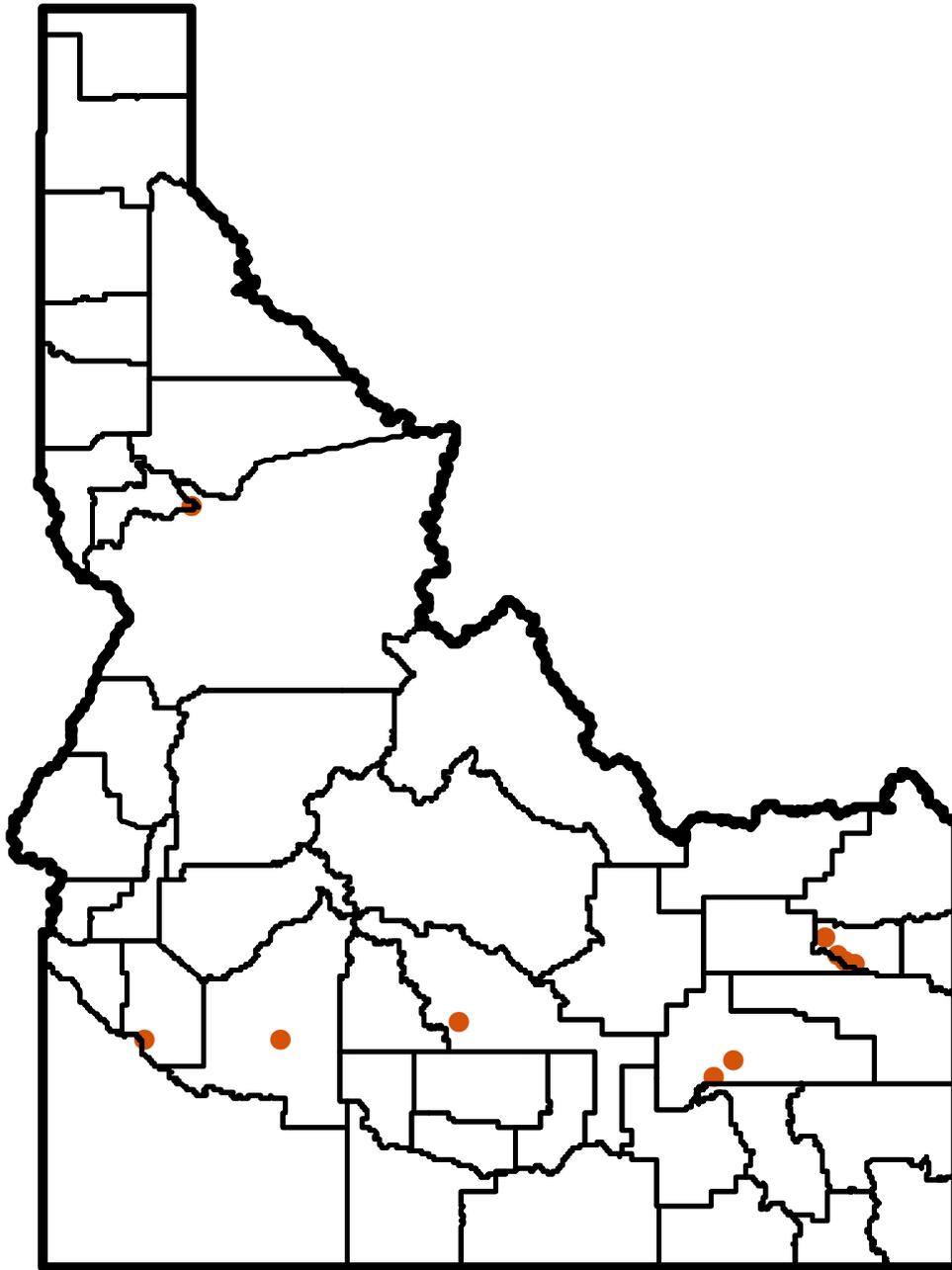


Figure 1 - YBCuckoo. Circles represent known element occurrences of Yellow-billed cuckoo. From: Idaho Conservation Data Center, 2001