



# YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO



The **yellow-billed cuckoo** (YBCU) is slender, long-tailed (length 26-30 cm, mass 55- 65 g) and zygodactylous: two inner toes point forward and two outer toes are reversed. The head and upper parts are plain grayish brown, faintly glossed with olive. Under- parts are dull white, faintly shaded with pale bluish gray or pale buff. It has a long, graduated tail (about 15 cm), plain grayish brown above and black below. Tail feathers are broadly tipped with bright white, giving the appearance of 6 large, white spots on the underside. Distinctive tail pattern is noticeable both in flight and when perched.

Wings are plain grayish brown above with dull cinnamon-rufous tips, and large rufous wing patches are visible during flight. The moderately long, curved bill has a hooked tip, the upper mandible is black, and the lower mandible is yellow to orange yellow at the base with a dark tip. The legs are blue-gray. Cuckoos are sexually and seasonally

monomorphic in plumage. In Utah, western Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and southern California, the cuckoo prefers desert riparian woodlands composed of willow, Fremont cottonwood, and dense mesquite for breeding habitat. In the arid Southwest, breeding populations of yellow-billed cuckoos are restricted to river bottoms, ponds, swampy places, and damp thickets where humidity is relatively high. On the lower Colorado River, the cuckoo must face extremely high midsummer temperatures that would kill unprotected eggs, and, therefore, is likely a nest-site specialist. Mature cottonwoods, with willows forming a subcanopy layer, provide the best shading of any riparian habitat, and provided the optimal habitat on the lower Colorado River. Standing water in many cottonwood-willow habitats may help lower air temperatures by evaporative cooling. During the nest building and egg-laying stages, cuckoos can be very sensitive to human disturbance. However, population declines are caused primarily by native riparian habitat loss through degradation

and fragmentation from lowered water tables, replacement by nonnative trees, grazing practices, and river management. Foraging typically occurred in areas with a greater overall foliage density than in areas where nesting occurs, with an average tree height of 10-15 meters. Yellow-billed cuckoos usually glean prey items from foliage or branches, sometimes while hovering, or sallying from a perch to capture prey on the wing. Yellow-billed cuckoos feed primarily on slow-moving insects, including grasshoppers, crickets, katydids, caterpillars, and various bugs and beetles.

YBCU breeding locations: Beal Lake Restoration Area, Palo Verde Ecological Reserve, Cibola NWR Unit #1, and Cibola Valley Conservation Area.

