

Status and Occurrence of Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.

Introduction and Distribution

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) is a species of passerine that is found breeding throughout eastern North America (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). There are two subspecies found throughout the bird's range (Hughes 1999). The nominate subspecies of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo is called (*Coccyzus americanus americanus*) and breeds from southern Maine, southern New Hampshire, southern Vermont, New York State, north into southern Quebec, west through southern Ontario, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, northern Minnesota, possibly south eastern North Dakota, north eastern and west-central South Dakota, south locally breeding in southeastern Montana, north eastern Wyoming, south through north eastern Colorado, south through Kansas, into central and eastern Texas, across the Gulf States to Florida and north throughout the eastern states (Hughes 1999).

In the West Indies, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo breeds, uncommonly in Cuba, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, more rarely on Jamaica and Virgin Islands, and has bred on St. Martin in northern Lesser Antilles, and possibly in the Bahamas (Hughes 1999). In Mexico, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo is fairly common to locally common along the Atlantic Slope from Coahuila south to Tamaulipas, and in the northern Yucatan Peninsula (Howell and Webb 2010). The species may breed in southern Veracruz (Howell and Webb 2010). The Yellow-billed Cuckoo may also breed in Guatemala (Land 1970) and El Salvador (Thurber *et al.* 1987). There are potential isolated breeding sites in South America with specimens taken in Colombia and Paraguay (Banks 1988).

The western subspecies of Yellow-billed Cuckoo is called (*Coccyzus americanus occidentalis*), is an endangered subspecies that formerly bred from southwestern British Columbia, western Washington, through southern Idaho, into northern Utah, Nevada, south western Wyoming, central Colorado, Arizona, western New Mexico, western Texas, south and west to southern Baja California, Sinaloa, and Chihuahua in Mexico (Haltermann 1991, Hughes 1999). Today this subspecies is extremely rare and declining, found in California, only in the Sacramento Valley in northern California, and along the Kern and Colorado River systems in southern California (Hughes 1999). There are small breeding populations found in traditional areas of this subspecies' former range in southwestern and southern Idaho, southern Utah, Arizona, New Mexico and West Texas (Hughes 1999).

Along the west coast of North America north of California, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo is a casually occurring species (Roberson 1980, Hughes 1999). It is unclear if records that have occurred in the past 30 years north of California come from this small isolated population, or other small

pockets left of this western population, or as vagrants from the more widespread eastern population (Roberson 1980, Hughes 1999, Wahl *et al.* 2005). In Oregon, there are 20 recent records accepted by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). In Washington, there are 10 recent records accepted by the Washington Bird Records Committee (WBRC 2012, Wahl *et al.* 2005). In British Columbia, there are historical records found from Vancouver to the Fraser Valley region until the late 1920s (Campbell *et al.* 1990b). As the western subspecies of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo declined throughout its entire range, there are no records of this species in British Columbia until the late 1980s (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). There are now over 20 records for the Yellow-billed Cuckoo in British Columbia; it is considered a casually occurring species in the Province (Toochin *et al.* 2014, see Table 1). The Yellow-billed Cuckoo is an accidental species in Alaska; there are 2 specimen records for the Panhandle of southeastern Alaska, with one of them being the endangered western subspecies (West 2008, Heinl and Piston 2009).

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo is a long distance migrant that flies from eastern North America straight south to South America (Lewington *et al.* 1992). As a result of this long migration, the species can be displaced by large, fast moving weather systems, such as large north-easterly depressions (Lewington *et al.* 1992). As a result of this displacement, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo occurs as a very rare vagrant in Western Europe from mid-September to mid-November (Lewington *et al.* 1992). There are also 39 fall records from the Azores (Rodebrand 2014).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo is covered in all standard North American field guides. There are 2 separate subspecies of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo that are very similar looking to each other and are best identified in the hand (Hughes 1999). One subspecies is often referred to in the literature as the western Yellow-billed Cuckoo and the other is the more widespread eastern Yellow-billed Cuckoo (Hughes 1999). The differences as outlined by Franzreb and Laymon (1993) found significant differences between the 2 subspecies of eastern and western cuckoos in wing and tail length, as well as bill length, and bill depth. Franzreb and Laymon (1993) also outlined potential behavioral, vocal, and ecological differences between eastern and western Yellow-billed Cuckoos, and concluded that the 2 subspecies should be retained pending further examination, especially in light of conservation implications for western populations of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo. Due to the subtle visual differences between the 2 subspecies of Yellow-billed Cuckoo, and for the purposes of this article, the identification criteria used is what is shown in all standard field guides which doesn't distinguish between the 2 subspecies.

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo is a long slender-bodied bird with a long tail (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The adult has a brownish cap with a dark patch through the eye (Sibley 2000). The eye is dark and is surrounded by a thin yellow eye ring (Sibley 2000). The bill is short, thick-based and curved at the tip with yellow on the lower mandible and yellow on the bottom of the upper mandible with dark black running the entire length of the top of the bill (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The nape, neck, back and rump are light brown coloured (Sibley 2000). The throat, chest and belly are a clean white (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The wings are long and pointed (Sibley 2000). The upper surface of the wing is rusty-brown coloured which is particularly obvious on birds in flight (Sibley 2000). The under surface of the wing is two-toned with the primary and secondary feathers a rich rusty-brown colour and the axillaries appearing clean white like the breast (Sibley 2000). The tail is long and round at the tip (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The upper surface of the tail is a light brown in the central feathers with the outer tail feathers dark black with white outer edges and bold white spots on the feather tips (Sibley 2000). The underside of the tail has black feathers that cut across the entire tail (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The tail has this black pattern followed by white and is repeated three times with the last dark area near the white undertail coverts limited to the central area of the tail, and is surrounded in white feather along the tail base (Hughes 1999, Sibley 2000). The feet are black (Dunn and Alderfer 2000). The immature birds hold their plumage from June to September and have a much paler undertail pattern that has limited white spots (Hughes 1999, Sibley 2000). Some birds will show no yellow on the bill (Sibley 2000).

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo's song is a loud distinct guttural, hard knocking series of "ku-ku-ku-ku-ku-ku-kddowl-kddowl" that is sometimes given with a single series of "kddowl" notes (Sibley 2000). Other calls include a dove-like "cloom" call that is repeated with long pauses (Sibley 2000). The Yellow-billed Cuckoo can also give a slow cooing series of descending and weakening "too too too too to to to" notes (Sibley 2000). For each of these species the coo calls, the pattern and tone are important for identification (Hughes 1999, Sibley 2000). There are some single note calls that are similar to the Black-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*) (Hughes 1999). Careful scrutiny of these sounds should be given by observers that only hear a Cuckoo call (Hughes 1999). The pattern of Black-billed Cuckoo is rapid and the tones are lower in pitch (Hughes 1999).

In the context of British Columbia, the only other Cuckoo species that observers need to be aware of that could cause confusion is the Black-billed Cuckoo. The Black-billed Cuckoo is the same overall length as the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, but weighs a bit less making this bird look slightly smaller (Hughes 1999, Sibley 2000). The adult Black-billed Cuckoo is light grayish-brown on the forehead with light-brown on the crown, neck, back and rump (Sibley 2000). The eyes are dark with a dark red orbital ring (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The bill is small with a blue-gray

lower mandible and a black upper mandible with a black tip (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The throat is off-white with a light brownish tinge (Hughes 1999, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The chest, breast and undertail coverts are also off-white in colour (Sibley 2000). The upper surface of the wing is brown with very little to no rufous colour on both sitting birds and in flight (Sibley 2000). On the underside of the wing the off-white axillaries extend well into the bases of the primary and secondary feathers (Sibley 2000). This gives the underside of the wing a dark edge (Sibley 2000). The tail is long and round at the tip (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The outer edge of the upper surface of the tail has a small amount of black with a small white tip to each feather (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The underside of the tail is gray overall with small white and dark spots that appear in four rows spread evenly throughout the length of the undertail (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The feet are black (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The juvenile birds are also light brown from the crown and neck, down the back to the rump (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The orbital ring is a pale greenish colour (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The bill is small and slender and is all dark with a gray base to the lower mandible (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The throat is buffy-coloured with a dusky-coloured breast and undertail coverts (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The folded wings have pale edges to the wing coverts and generally lack any bright rufous colour (Hughes 1999, Sibley 2000). The underside of the tail is overall gray in colour with some small white spots (Hughes 1999, Sibley 2000). The song is a hollow, whistled “*po po po*” often repeated in a long, rapid series gradually falling into a triplet pattern (Hughes 1999, Sibley 2000). Where there can be confusion with Yellow-billed Cuckoo call notes is that Black-billed Cuckoo can give a series of rolling “*kddow*” notes (Sibley 2000). These are generally higher pitched, quicker, and not as guttural as the Yellow-billed Cuckoos’ (Sibley 2000). The calls begin rapidly and end with decelerating “*cloo*” notes (Sibley 2000). The Black-billed Cuckoo also gives a rapid, hard, descending “*k-k-k-k*” or a two part descending “*kru-dru*” (Sibley 2000).

Occurrence and Documentation

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo is a species that, up until the late 1920s, was found in the breeding season in the Province (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). Skin specimens were taken from southern Vancouver Island, from areas in Vancouver to Chilliwack, and the Kamloops area (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). It is unclear what caused the rapid range reduction of this species in western North America (Roberson 1980, Hughes 1999, Wahl *et al.* 2005). By the 1960s, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo was gone from most of its former western range and today is classified as endangered in parts of Western North America (Hughes 1999). Since 1989 there has been a slow resurgence of the species in British Columbia with a total of 20 records (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). Of these, 7 records come from the Okanagan region of the Province, from Kamloops

to Osoyoos (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There are 4 records from the Kootenay region of the Province: 2 of these records come from the Creston area, 1 from Revelstoke and 1 from Castlegar. There is also a single record from the Fraser Canyon with a bird found in Boston Bar, and 2 from the Hope Airport (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). There is 1 recent record reported from the Upper Fraser Valley in Chilliwack (Toochin 2012c, see Table 1). There is excellent habitat found in the Upper Fraser Valley from Mission to Agassiz, including parts of Abbotsford and Chilliwack which was part of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo's traditional range. In the future, other observations of single birds or possibly a pair of birds could be found utilizing this habitat. There are no recent records for Vancouver or the Lower Mainland region of the Province (Toochin 2012a, see Table 1). On Vancouver Island, there have been 5 records since 1989, and these are scattered all over the Island with Jordan River having 2 records from the same spot (Toochin 2012b, Toochin *et al.* 2014b, see Table 1). The Yellow-billed Cuckoo prefers old cottonwood stands that have a dense understory of either shrub trees or Willow (Hughes 1999). This species eats larger insects: one favourite insect is the Western Tent Caterpillar (*Malacosoma californicum*)(Hughes 1999). This species of caterpillar routinely erupts, in population, on both the coast and in the interior. Observers should watch for Yellow-billed Cuckoo in appropriate habitat and during tent caterpillar eruption years in the future.

The timing of records for the Yellow-billed Cuckoo since 1989 is interesting and raises a glimmer of hope for the species in the Province. The months of July and October have the highest clusters of records (see Table 2). The month of July has 6 records and the month of October has 8 records (see Table 2). This pattern does fit well with the species migration pattern with birds arriving later in June and looking for a breeding territory in July (Hughes 1999). The October records also fit perfectly with the fall migration period when birds are heading to the wintering grounds (Hughes 1999). What is unclear is if records are birds that originated in Eastern North America and are individuals that overshot the breeding grounds or in the fall have made a wrong flight on their southbound migration. There are still areas of good breeding habitat for this species in the Province, and observers are encouraged to check in the future during the latter part of June and during the month of July in appropriate habitat. It is possible that future observations might include the first nesting pair in British Columbia in almost 100 years. As with any Cuckoo species encountered in the Province, all future records of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo should be properly documented with photographs or recordings of the song and calls.



Figures 1 & 2: Record #30: Yellow-billed Cuckoo in Castlegar on October 28, 2002.
Photos © Larry Prosser.



Figure 3: Record #35: Yellow-billed Cuckoo in Cawston on October 20, 2007.
Photo © Peter Candido.



Figure 4: Habitat found in British Columbia that is perfectly suited for Yellow-billed Cuckoo. This photo was taken on July 24, 2014 from an area that had a calling Yellow-billed Cuckoo at North Bend near Boston Bar. Photo © Rick Toochin.



Figure 5: Habitat found in British Columbia that is perfectly suited for Yellow-billed Cuckoo. This photo was taken on August 15, 2014 from an area that had a calling Yellow-billed Cuckoo at Hope Airport. Photo © Rick Toochin.

Table 1: Records of Yellow-billed Cuckoo for British Columbia:

- 1.(1) adult May 1881: Burrard Inlet, Vancouver (Macoun and Macoun 1909)
- 2.(2) adults June 1882: Kamloops [found breeding] (Macoun and Macoun 1909)
- 3.(2) adults June 1887: Skinner Swamp, Victoria (Macoun and Macoun 1909)
- 4.(1) female July 17, 1887: (specimen: MVZ 101645 Chilliwack (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 5.(1) male May, 26, 1888: (specimen: ROM 8759) Chilliwack (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 6.(1) female May 28, 1891: (specimen: MCZ 244703) Chilliwack (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 7.(1) female June 4, 1891: (specimen: NCZ 1879103) Chilliwack (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 8.(1) female July 1892: (specimen: RBCM 1757) Victoria (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 9.(1) adult female May 30, 1896: (specimen: FMNH 6509) Sumas, Abbotsford
(Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 10.(1) adult female June 1896: (specimen: FMNH 137663) Victoria (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 11.(1) male July 3, 1896: (specimen: RBCM 1756) Victoria (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 12.(1) female June 16, 1903: (specimen: ROM 69268) Victoria (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 13.(1) female June 28, 1904: (specimen: RBCM 480) Victoria (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 14.(1) adult female August 1, 1913: (specimen: NMC 47844) Vancouver (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)

- 15.(1) female August 29, 1921: (specimen: UBC 4905) Vedder Mountain (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 16.(2) adults July 1922: Marpole, Vancouver (Cumming 1932, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 17.(1) male August 9, 1922: (specimen: UBC 4904) Vancouver (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 18.(1) female August 5, 1923: (specimen: ROM 81981) Sumas Prairie, East Abbotsford (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 19.(1) male June 10, 1926: (specimen: RBCM 6940) Vancouver (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 20.(1) female June 4, 1927: K. Racey (collected: specimen UBC 4903) Little Allouette River, Pitt Meadows (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 21.(1) male June 19, 1927: (specimen: RBCM 13029) Huntingdon, near Abbotsford (Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 22.(1) adult July 5, 1989: Richard C. West (specimen: RBCM 21620) Victoria (Johnson and Tweit 1989, Campbell *et al.* 1990b)
- 23.(1) adult July 8, 1992: Denise Brownlie & Eileen Dillabough: Kelowna (Siddle 1992c, Davidson 1993, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 24.(1) adult July 27, 1994: Verna Smythe (specimen: UBC 15169) Kelowna (Bain 1994d, Davidson 1995, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 25.(1) adult April 25, 1995: Lee Larkin: Chiliwack UTM 579267 5438801 – Extrom Rd, Ryder Lake (Toochin 2012c, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 26.(1) immature October 28, 1995: Rick Howie (specimen) McClure, north of Kamloops (Bain and Holder 1995f, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 27.(1) immature September 14, 1998: Clara Ritcey (photo) Kamloops (Bain and Shannon 1998b, Shepard 1999a, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 28.(1) immature October 20-24, 1999: Ed McMackin, mobs (photo) Duck Lake, Creston (Bain and Shannon 1999e, Shepard 2000, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 29.(1) adult August 18, 2001: Cathy Koot, Tom Foley: below the Clayton Falls Lookout, Bella Coola (Cecile 2002a, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 30.(1) immature October 18- November 1, 2002: Janice Arndt, mobs (photo) Waldie Island Trail, near Castlegar (Cecile 2003a, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 31.(1) adult May 6-10, 2004: Julian Hudson: Revelstoke (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 32.(1) adult June 30-July 1, 2004: Chris Saunders, and other observers: Jordan River (Cecile 2004d, Toochin 2012b)
- 33.(1) (heard only) June 11, 2005: Chris Charlesworth, Ryan Tomlinson: Garnet Valley near Summerland, Okanagan (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 34.(1) adult July 3, 2005: Jukka Jantunen: at north end of Osoyoos Lake off Road 22, South Okanagan (Cecile 2005d, Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 35.(1) immature October 17-20, 2007: Robert and Jane Merrell, mobs (photo) Cawston (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 36.(1) adult August 2, 2008: Karen Wedel, Menno Wedel, Bill Buckley: 2676 Wilfert Road, Victoria (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 37.(1) immature October 25, 2008: Koos van Sittert (photo) Gartley Point, south of Courtenay (Toochin *et al.* 2014b)
- 38.(1) immature October 28, 2009: Rick Toochin: Jordan River (Toochin 2012b)
- 39.(1) adult (heard only) July 1, 2010: Rick Toochin: Hope Airport (Toochin 2012c)

- 40.(1) immature October 20-22, 2010: Gary Breault, other observers (photo) Creston (Charlesworth 2011a)
- 41.(1) immature October 16, 2013: Chris Siddle, and other observers: Vasuex Lake (Toochin *et al.* 2014a)
- 42.(1) adult July 23-24, 2014: Dave & Tom Beeke, mobs (calls recorded) Chaumox Road, North Bend (D. Beeke pers. comm.)
- 43.(1) adult August 14, 2014: Mel Thorn: Hack’s Pond, near end of River Road, near Oliver (M. Thorn pers. comm.)
- 44.(1) adult August 15, 2014: Rick Toochin: Hope Airport (R. Toochin pers. obs.)

Table 2: Seasonal distribution of Yellow-billed Cuckoo records in British Columbia:

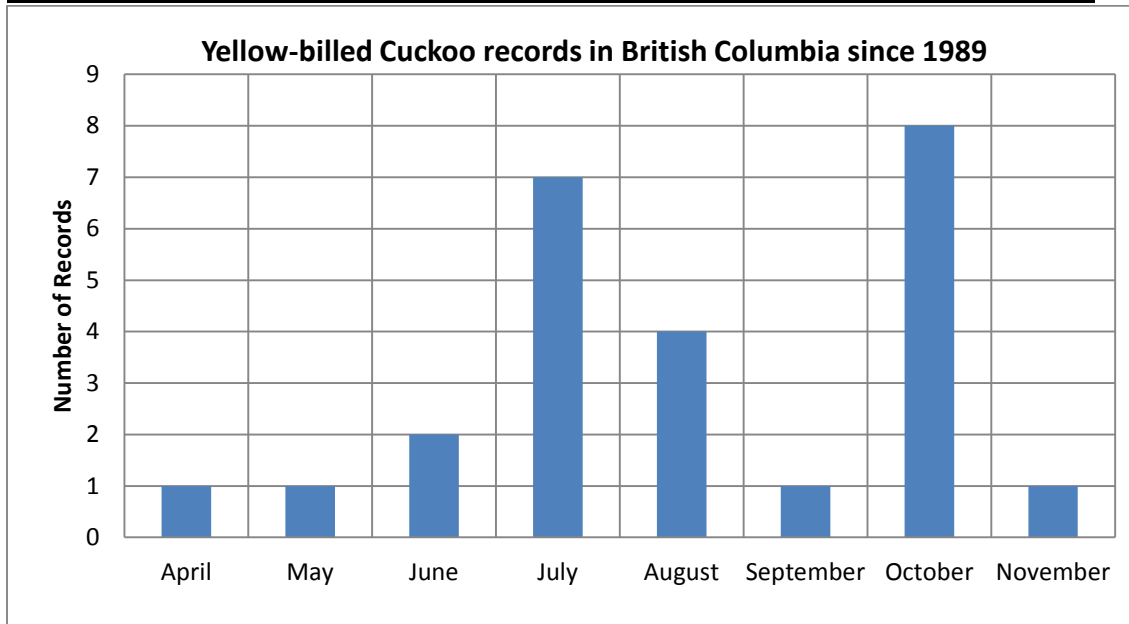


Table 2: Note the sharply defined occurrence in the summer and fall of this species with July and October having the highest number of records.

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