

# Yellow-billed Cuckoo

*Coccyzus americanus*



TPWD PHOTO



This shy, slender bird gets its name from the soft *coo-coo-coo-coo* call of the male seeking mates. In some places, it is called the "rain crow" or the "storm crow" because it begins calling right before the summer rains begin.

*Northern Pineywoods*

# Yellow-billed Cuckoo

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## APPEARANCE

**Length:** 10.5 to 12.5 inches (26 to 32 cm)

**Wingspan:** 17 inches (43 cm)

### Distinguishing Characteristics

- Lower *mandible* (bill) is yellow
- Black upper bill that curves slightly downward
- Head, neck, back and upper wings brown
- Chin, breast and belly white
- Two columns of large white spots on the under side of the tail
- Long, slender tail
- Two toes point forward, the other two point backward.

## LIFE HISTORY

**Range:** North, Central and South America; migrates to North America throughout the summer months, but winters in South America; in Texas from April through November

**Diet:** Insects (especially hairy caterpillars and cicadas) bird eggs, snails, small frogs, lizards, berries and some fruit

**Predators:** Egg predators such as raccoons and jays; fledglings sometimes eaten by raptors

**Sexual maturity:** Spring

**Mating season:** Mid-April through mid-September, peaking in May

**Nests:** Saucer-shaped and flimsy, nests are made of twigs and lined with roots and dried leaves, 4 to 8 feet (1 to 2.5 m) above the ground.

**Eggs:** Two to four light blue eggs, about 1.2 inches (31mm) long

**Incubation:** Nine to 11 days

**Chicks:** The chicks are *altricial* (they hatch helpless, blind, and featherless). Within a week of hatching, the chicks can climb into branches and within three weeks, they can fly.

## HABITAT

Yellow-billed cuckoos prefer open woodlands with dense undergrowth, overgrown orchards and pastures, moist thickets and willow groves along stream banks.

## BEHAVIOR

Because they spend winters in mature tropical forests in South America, they are one of the last migratory bird species to arrive in North America. They arrive so late that they have little time to build a nest, select a mate, lay eggs and raise their young. Cuckoos mate with one partner a year. The male courts the female by offering her sticks and other nest building materials. If the female seems receptive, the male will land on her shoulders and place a piece of food in her mouth. Egg laying is timed to occur when caterpillars and other invertebrate prey are most abundant. If food is abundant, the cuckoos will lay more eggs, and they will sometimes use other birds' nests. This is called "nest parasitism." The male takes care of the first fledgling and the female cares for the rest.

## NOW YOU KNOW!

- The yellow-billed cuckoo's closest relative is the roadrunner.
- Feathers account for almost half of the yellow-billed cuckoo's body weight.
- *Coccyz* is Greek for a "cuckoo" and *americanus* is the Latin form meaning "of America." Its scientific name means "cuckoo of America."

## YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOOS AND PEOPLE

Some destruction of both its breeding grounds in North America and its wintering habitat in South America is limiting the yellow-billed cuckoo. Each year, it has fewer safe places to raise young and to rest and rebuild energy for the long migration to and from its breeding grounds. Few species can survive this double threat. Planting willow and cottonwood saplings, increasing woodland density, could revitalize feeding and nesting sites of the yellow-billed cuckoo.