

(MCPRD staff)



Cuculidae the CUCKOOS

The Cuculidae family is made up of more than just cuckoos. It is a diverse family of 146 species spread worldwide that includes Old World cuckoos, New World cuckoos, malkohas, coucas, coucals, anis, roadrunners, and more. Only six of these birds are found in the United States and only two, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo and the Black-billed Cuckoo, have been recorded here in the Central Carolinas.

Both of our cuckoos have slender bodies, long pointed wings, long tails, and they both have two toes placed forward and two toes pointed back (zygodactyl feet). The Yellow-billed Cuckoo is a breeding resident here, while the Black-billed Cuckoo is a bird seen here only during spring or fall migration. Both birds are quite similar in appearance, but the two can be distinguished if they are seen or heard well.

As their common names imply, the adult Yellow-billed Cuckoo has yellow on its lower bill, and the Black-billed Cuckoo's bill is entirely black. Also, the Yellow-billed Cuckoo's primary wing feathers are obviously rufous when seen in flight or when perched, while the Black-billed's primaries are all brown. The tails of the adult birds differ as well with the Yellow-billed's tail showing a bold black-and-white pattern, while the Black-billed's tail is a mix of dull gray and white. The adult Black-billed Cuckoo has a red eye-ring, while the Yellow-billed's thin eye-ring is yellow. The song of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo is a repeated *kouwp kouwp kouwp*, while the Black-billed's song sounds like *cu-cu-cu*, repeated slowly, over and over.

For more than a century, local residents have called the cuckoo "raincrow." Many considered the cuckoo to be a "weather prophet"—a harbinger of rain. When the raincrow called...rain would soon appear. The cuckoo's haunting call was once a part of daily life in summer in this part of the South, and people paid attention when they heard it. In 1897, one Newton resident wrote: "By watching the movements and listening to the notes of this bird you can get a better idea of the changes of the weather from fair to foul or vice versa than you can get from the prognostications of the local prophet or from the signal service." The Signal Service was the early National Weather Service.

The Charlotte News published a poem in June 1914 which included this verse: "An' ever time I prays fer rain / De hot sky won't begin it, / But high up yonder in de oak, / Des any time de raincrow croak / he fetch it in a minute!" During extended dry spells, Charlotteans would ask "Who killed the rain-crow?" When asked to create a list of his fondest memories of country living, one old-timer ranked the call of the raincrow just above "the smell of hay and old hay lofts," writing: "The rich mellow note of the raincrow, uttering his prophecy in the dampness of a cloudy dawn."