

Yellow-billed Cuckoo *Coccyzus americanus*



Folk Name: Rain Crow

Status: Breeder

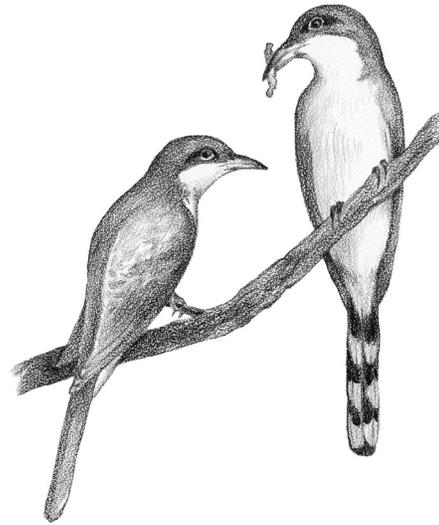
Abundance: Uncommon to Fairly Common

Habitat: Deciduous forests

This passage, published in *The Charlotte Observer* in January 1914, provides a splendid description of our Yellow-billed Cuckoo:

A shy and retiring bird of our Summer woods and groves—one more often heard than seen—is the so-called raincrow. This bird is not a crow at all, his true name being the yellow-billed cuckoo. He is a bird of plain browns and drabs, with no bright colors whatever, but he makes up in usefulness what he lacks in beauty. Among the favorite foods of this most useful bird are those hairy caterpillars that do much damage to our trees in the Summer time, and without the help of the “raincrow” and other birds of similar feeding habits, the trees around our homes would fare badly indeed.

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo has long been highly regarded for its propensity for eating eastern tent caterpillars (*Malacasoma americanum*) in the spring and webworms (*Hyphantria cunea*) in the fall, both of which



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are known to inflict serious damage on many of our trees. The stomach contents of one cuckoo examined at 6:00 a.m. produced a total of 23 tent caterpillars—and the bird was just getting started feeding for the day.

Both Yellow-billed and Black-billed Cuckoos are known to call during the night. In July 1909, F.A. Olds wrote this as part of a column in *The Charlotte Observer*:

In this part of the country on a summer day one can hear two very sad bird notes; one, that made by the mourning-dove, really one of the most plaintive things of which the writer has knowledge; the other the note of the American cuckoo, which...people in North Carolina...term the rain-crow. Well, a few nights ago I heard a rain-crow give his cry between 9 and 10 o'clock. It sounded very odd, indeed, and was repeated two or three times, not far from the window where the writer was seated, other persons in the room noticing the bird also.

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo prefers to nest in open, deciduous woodlands and shrublands with small clearings and also in moist riparian habitats. It is a neotropical migrant that spends the winter as far south as South America. In the spring, it flies north to return to its breeding grounds. Most generally arrive here by early to mid-April and then leave again by the end of October. We have a few reports of arrival dates in March, including one very early bird reported on March 9, 2006, in Davidson which, unfortunately, was identified by call only. There are a few late departure reports as well. The founder of forensic ornithology, Roxie Laybourne (then



Yellow-billed Cuckoo spotted at Colonel Francis Beatty Park, Matthews. (Will Stuart)

Roxie Collie Simpson), recorded a Yellow-billed Cuckoo in Charlotte on October 16, 1943. An injured juvenile male was brought to a local wildlife rehabilitator on October 23, 1999. The bird received 5 days of constant medical care; unfortunately, it did not survive. Our latest departure dates are October 24, 2010; November 4, 2010; and November 10, 2004.

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo was documented on 85% of the first 50 Charlotte Spring Bird Counts with a high count of 28 birds recorded on the 1979 count and an overall average of 4.7 birds per count. Analysis of the last 20 count years indicates only 0.111 Yellow-billed Cuckoos were found per party-hour on this increasingly urbanized count.

We have evidence of nesting in the region from April through August. The Yellow-billed Cuckoo is known for its rapid development. Incubation can take as little as 9–10 days, and nestlings generally fledge about 7–8 days after hatching. This is quicker than many other species of birds. This cuckoo will often raise two broods.

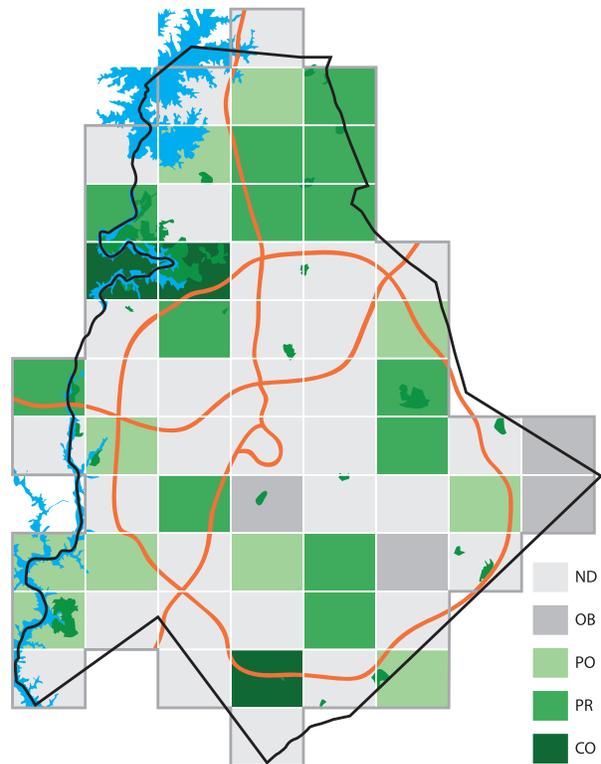
Mark R. Bostrom located an active Yellow-billed Cuckoo nest at Cowan's Ford Wildlife Refuge on April



Cuckoo nest in June. The pin feathers have started to appear. (MCPRD staff)

26, 2016. The birds were already incubating. The nest was built about 35 feet high on a horizontal branch of a water oak tree. This is our earliest nesting date for this species. One Yellow-billed Cuckoo was observed in Charlotte “carrying food to nestlings” on the late date of 7 August. There are reports of nestlings still in the nest in the North Carolina Piedmont as late as September. These late reports most likely represent second broods.

Nationwide, the population of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo is in steep decline. Pesticide use and habitat loss are believed to be two of the primary causes.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Somewhat Local (PR/13, CO/3)