

**Status and Occurrence of Black-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*) in British Columbia.**  
**By Rick Toochin and Don Cecile.**

**Introduction and Distribution**

The Black-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*) is a species of passerine that is found breeding in North America from Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, southern Quebec, southern Ontario, southern and central Manitoba, southern and central Saskatchewan, southern and central Alberta, south through Montana, central and eastern Wyoming, southern Nebraska, with range extending west along the South Platte River in northeastern Colorado, central and eastern Kansas, northeastern Oklahoma, southern Missouri (but absent from Mississippi lowlands of the southeast), southern Illinois, southern Indiana, eastern mountains and Cumberland Plateau in the eastern half of Kentucky; and in eastern Tennessee, the western North Carolina mountain region, and locally in southeastern Virginia and the western Virginia mountain region (Hughes 2001, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The Black-billed Cuckoo has also bred in southern Idaho (Burleigh 1972), possibly in northern Utah (Hayward *et al.* 1976), eastern Colorado (Andrews and Righter 1992), central Oklahoma (Sutton 1967), northwestern Arkansas (James and Neal 1986), western Tennessee (Nicholson 1997), northern Alabama (Imhof 1976), and northern Georgia (Burleigh 1958). The Black-billed Cuckoo has been found only once breeding in Texas (Fischer 1979).

The Black-billed Cuckoo is a highly migratory species that winters in South America, but the distribution is poorly known. It is thought that the Black-billed Cuckoo winters from Colombia east to western Venezuela, and south to central Peru (Meyer de Schauensee and Phelps 1978, Hilty and Brown 1986). It is believed to winter further south in eastern Peru and northern and eastern Bolivia (Hughes 2001). The Black-billed Cuckoo has also been reported in the winter months from Ecuador (Hughes 2001) and in Bolivia (Remsen and Ridgely 1980, Remsen and Traylor 1983). The Black-billed Cuckoo is accidental in winter in Trinidad (Ffrench 1991).

Along the west coast of North America, the Black-billed Cuckoo is an extremely rare bird with very few records. In California, there are 16 accepted records by California Rare Bird Committee (Hamilton *et al.* 2007). There are no accepted records for Oregon by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). In Washington, there are 4 records accepted by the Washington Bird Records Committee (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2012). In British Columbia, the Black-billed Cuckoo is a casual species with over 20 Provincial records (Campbell *et al.* 1997, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1 & 2). There are no records for Alaska (Gibson *et al.* 2013).

The Black-billed Cuckoo is accidental in Greenland and in Western Europe (Lewington *et al.* 1992). There are 4 fall records for the Azores (Rodebrand 2014). The Black-billed Cuckoo is a much rarer vagrant in Europe (12 records) than the Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*) (52 records). The lack of Western European records is most likely due to the more southwesterly movement of the Black-billed Cuckoo from eastern North America toward the wintering grounds (Cramp 1985).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

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 (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, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The eyes are dark with a dark red orbital ring (Sibley 2000). 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 (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The chest, breast and undertail coverts are also off-white in colour (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The upper surface of the wing is brown with very little to no rufous colour on both sitting birds and in flight (Sibley 2000, Hughes 2001). 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, Hughes 2001). 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, Hughes 2001). 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, Hughes 2001). The orbital ring is a pale greenish colour (Sibley 2000, Hughes 2001). The bill is all dark with a gray base (Hughes 2001). The lower mandible is small and slender in size (Sibley 2000, Hughes 2001). The throat is buffy-coloured with a dusky breast and undertail coverts (Sibley 2000, Hughes 2001). The folded wings have pale edges to the wing coverts, and generally lack any bright rufous colour (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The underside of the tail is overall gray with some small white spots (Sibley 2000, Hughes 2001). The song is a hollow, whistled “*po po po*” often repeated in a long, rapid series gradually falling into a triplet pattern (Sibley 2000). Where there can be confusion with Yellow-billed Cuckoo call notes is that Black-billed Cuckoo can give a rolling “*kddow*” (Sibley 2000, Hughes 2001). These are generally higher pitched, quicker, and not as guttural as the Yellow-billed Cuckoos (Sibley 2000, Hughes 2001). The calls begin rapidly and end with decelerating “*cloo*” notes (Sibley 2000, Hughes 2001). The Black-billed Cuckoo also gives a rapid, hard, descending “*k-k-k-k*” or a two part descending “*kru-dru*” (Sibley 2000, Hughes 2001).

The only other species that can be confused with a Black-billed Cuckoo is the boldly patterned Yellow-billed Cuckoo. The Yellow-billed Cuckoo is a long slender-bodied bird with a long tail (Sibley 2000). The adult has a brown cap and dark patch through the eye (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The eye is dark in colour with 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 running the entire length of the top of the bill (Sibley 2000). The nape, neck back and rump are light brown-coloured (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The throat, chest and belly are a clean white colour (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The wings are long and pointed (Sibley 2000). The upper surface of the wing is rusty-brown-coloured (Sibley 2000). This is particularly obvious on birds in flight (Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The under surface of the wing is two toned with the primary and secondary feathers a rich rusty-brown 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 (Sibley 2000). It is surrounded in white feathers along the tail base (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The feet are black (Sibley 2000). The immature birds hold their plumage from June to September and have a much paler undertail pattern that has limited white spots (Sibley 2000). Some birds will show no yellow on the bill (Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

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 (Hughes 1999). 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). With all of this species "*coo*" calls the pattern and tone are important for identification (Hughes 1999). There are some single note calls that are similar to the Black-billed Cuckoo; therefore, careful scrutiny of these sounds should be given by observers that only hear a single Cuckoo call (Hughes 1999, Hughes 2001). The pattern of Black-billed Cuckoo is rapid and the tones are lower in pitch (Hughes 2001).

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

In British Columbia, the Black-billed Cuckoo is a very rare bird with only 26 Provincial records (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). This low number of records is likely due to the species shy nature and its late arrival in the Province. There are 11 records for the

month of June and 13 records for the month of July (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1 & 2). These 2 months make up the bulk of records for the Province and all of them come from areas of the interior (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). A recent record in Winfield, from July 3-7, 2014, just north of Kelowna, in the Okanagan Valley was in perfect breeding habitat (D. Cecile pers. obs.). In the past there have been 3 occasions in the southern interior where 2 Black-billed Cuckoos were observed together in a suitable breeding habitat (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1). Though no nesting birds were ever found, it is possible that a breeding record of the Black-billed Cuckoo could be found in the future. Observers are encouraged to check thick Aspen Groves with Cottonwood and thick scrub habitat (often near a water source) for this species. One explanation for the occurrence of the Black-billed Cuckoo in the Province is the cyclical abundance of the Western Tent Caterpillar (*Malacosoma californicum*) which is one of this species favourite insect prey (Hughes 2000). It is likely that Black-billed Cuckoo's will follow these irruptive outbreaks of the Western Tent Caterpillar and end up in British Columbia on years where they flourish in the Province. The late arrival of the species, often in mid-June, makes them less likely for observers to detect, since most observers stop looking after early June when migration is over. The shy nature of the species and its habit of calling at night and early in the morning also make it less likely to be detected (Hughes 2000). The Black-billed Cuckoo is a species that calls during and just after rain showers (Hughes 2000). The bird in Winfield, in July 2014, was noted calling in the early afternoon just after a heavy down pour (R. Toochin pers. obs.). There are 3 spring records of the Black-billed Cuckoo for the month of May for the Province and 4 records for the fall in the month of August (Campbell *et al.* 1990b, Toochin *et al.* 2014a, see Table 1 & 2). Records of the Black-billed Cuckoo are extremely rare on the coast with only 2 records found to date. There is a spring record of a calling and briefly observed bird from May 20, 2002, by the author in Pitt Meadows (Toochin *et al.* 2014c). This was the first record of this species for the Vancouver area (R. Toochin pers. obs.). The other record is of an immature, well observed from the outer coast of Vancouver Island on August 30, 1986, at Frank Island on Chesterman's Beach near Tofino (Toochin *et al.* 2014b). Since birds that are not calling are very difficult to detect, it is possible that the odd bird does pass through British Columbia in the fall in September and October, but detection borders on pure accident.



Figure 1: Record #26: Black-billed Cuckoo adult along Beaver Lake Road, Winfield on July 6, 2014. Photo © Don Cecile.



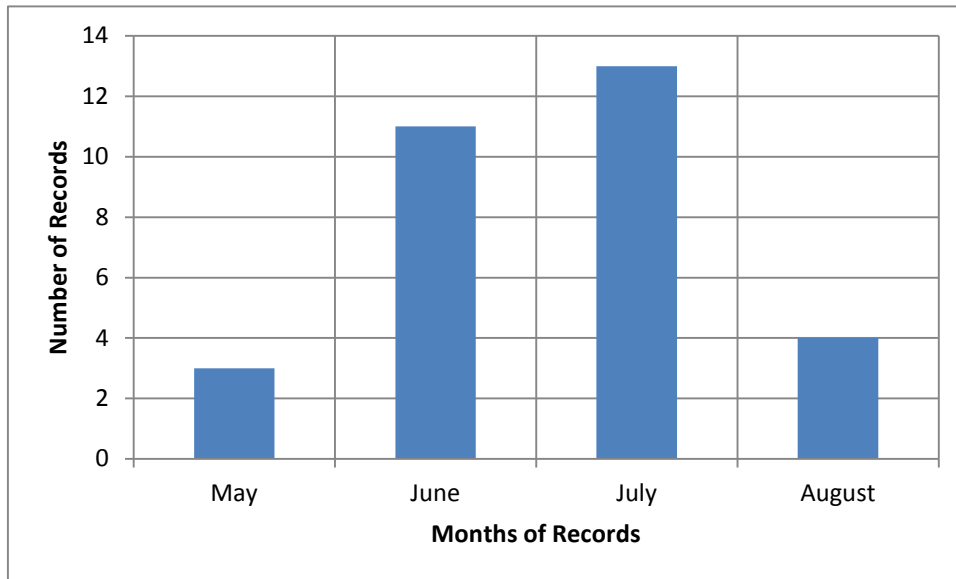
Figures 2 & 3: Record #26: Black-billed Cuckoo adult along Beaver Lake Road, Winfield on July 6, 2014. Photos © Rick Toochin.

**Table 1: Records of Black-billed Cuckoo for British Columbia:**

- 1.(1) adult June 22, 1926: Allan C. Brooks: Okanagan Landing (Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 2.(1) adult late May – early June, 1957: Gissing: Vernon (Grissing 1959, Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 3.(1) adult June 8-July 6, 1958: Alwin Gissing: Brisco (Grissing 1959, Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 4.(1) adult summer 1958: Dr. Robert Stein (tape recording) near Quesnel (Grissing 1959, Campbell *et al.* 1990)

- 5.(1) adult May 1967: D. Tait: Trout Creek Point (Cannings *et al.* 1987)
- 6.(1) adult July 19, 1968: RAC, RJC, SGC, mobs: Trout Creek Point (Cannings *et al.* 1987)
- 7.(1) adult June 28, 1973: (RBCM Photo 300) Invermere (Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 8.(1) female July 23, 1973: (specimen: 12097) Windermere (Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 9.(1 & 2) adult June 17-24 & July 5, 1980: 11km south of Revelstoke (Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 10.(1) adult July 5, 1980: J. P. Goosen, mobs: Corn Creek Channel, 8km west of Creston (Butler *et al.* 1986)
- 11.(2) adults July 13, 1980: K. Gruener: Wye Lake, Vernon (Cannings *et al.* 1987)
- 12.(1) adult July 9, 16 & August 12, 1981: I. Barnett, mobs: riparian thicket at north end of Osoyoos Lake (Cannings *et al.* 1987)
- 13.(1) adult (heard only) June 27, 1982: Kamloops (Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 14.(1) adult July 10 & 12, 1982: 16km south of Revelstoke (Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 15.(1) adult August 18, 1984: (specimen: RBCM 18317) Morrissey Park, near Fernie (Campbell 1985, Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 16.(1) adult (heard only) June 20, 1986: Brisco (Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 17.(2) adults early July, 1986: Red Lake (Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 18.(1) adult August 12, 1986: north end in thickets of Osoyoos Lake (Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 19.(1) immature August 30, 1986: George Smith, mobs: Frank Island, Chesterman's Beach near Tofino (Fraser 1987, Campbell *et al.* 1990, Toochin *et al.* 2014e)
- 20.(1) adult July 2-4, 1988: Chris Siddle, mobs (RBCM Photo 1221) Revelstoke (Campbell *et al.* 1990)
- 21.(1) adult (heard calling) July 14, 1995: Chris Miller: Vaseux Lake, South Okanagan (Bowling 1995, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 22.(1) adult (heard only) June 22, 1999: Mark Phinney: 25 km southwest of Fort St John, south of Peace River (Toochin *et al.* 2014d)
- 23.(1) adult May 20, 2002: Rick Toochin, Corina & Barbara Isaac: Grant Narrows Nature Dyke Trail, Pitt Meadows (Toochin *et al.* 2014d, Toochin 2014a)
- 24.(1) adult June 20, 2006: Marc-Andre Beaucher, mobs (photo) Corn Creek Marsh, Creston (Cecile 2006d, Toochin *et al.* 2014d)
- 25.(1) adult June 21-23, 2007: Chris Siddle, mobs: south end Goose Lake Road, Vernon (Toochin *et al.* 2014d)
- 26.(1) adult July 3-7, 2014: Michael Force, Doug Kragh, mobs (photo) 4.5km on the Beaver Lake Road, east of Winfield (D. Cecile pers. comm.)

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



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

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