

Alberta Records of Yellow-billed Cuckoos

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Pincher Creek was getting its first real snow of the winter on November 25, 2001 when a cuckoo flew in from the west in mid-morning and landed in a weeping birch.

The bird perched for about 45 minutes, shivering constantly, giving ample time for Carita Bergman to photograph and identify the bird as a Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*). The identification was confirmed when the photographs were forwarded to the senior author at the Provincial Museum of Alberta on the advice of Lynn Vogt, co-compiler of reports of rarities in the province at the time. The record has since been accepted by the Alberta Bird Record Committee (ABRC; Slater and Hudon 2002).

Records of Yellow-billed Cuckoos in the province have been few and far between. The first individual of this species for Alberta was found dead below a window in Edmonton on September 14, 1968 and donated to the Provincial Museum where it was prepared as a skin (accession number Z69.40.1). Based on the gonads and gray tail feathers with poorly defined whitish tips, the bird was a

hatching-year female (Pyle 1997).

Another Yellow-billed Cuckoo hit a window in Rocky Mountain House on July 25, 1971, subsequently died, but was not preserved (Salt and Salt 1976). Apparently, color photographs were taken of the bird, but they cannot be located, so the age of the bird cannot be determined. Another individual of this species was also reported at the time but lacks documentation (Salt and Salt 1976).

A more contentious occurrence took place during the first provincial breeding bird atlas in Elk Island National Park, outside of Edmonton, when Bob Carroll saw a cuckoo on July 12, 1987. Photographs taken at the time clearly identify a cuckoo, but because of poor lighting the species' identification is difficult. However, the observer recorded the bird's bill color as yellow and recorded a glance of reddish color to its wings. Although the Atlas Rare Bird Committee rejected the claim, the current ABRC recently reviewed the

evidence and accepted this record (Slater and Hudon 2002). The Elk Island bird was seen at the end of a year with abundant tent caterpillars (*Malacosoma* spp.) (Bob Carroll, pers. comm.), of which these cuckoos are particularly fond (Hughes 1999).

A Yellow-billed Cuckoo was also reported on July 9, 1996 at Dinosaur Provincial Park by G. Donovan and D. Hutchinson (Bain and Holder 1996). Apparently some documentation was filed with the park (Gary Donovan, pers. comm.), but until it is reviewed the record must be considered unsubstantiated.

More recently, a specimen of Yellow-billed Cuckoo turned up in a freezer at the Provincial Museum (accession number Z01.3.1). This bird, found in the snow in Edmonton not far from the museum in early April 2000, was in a partial state of decomposition. It was found and brought to the museum by P. Bidwell. The bird had been overlooked by the receiving party as a Black-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*), although the early date should have raised some eyebrows.



PINCHER CREEK YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO CARITA BERGMAN

The April 2000 cuckoo has adult-like rectrices (black with sharply defined white tips; right r4 and r5 as far as we can tell) in addition to juvenal, tapered gray rectrices (4 more feathers) (Pyle 1997). In most songbirds this condition would indicate that this individual is an after hatch-year (AHY) bird, as songbirds do not usually molt rectrices in their first fall, only in their second. However, Yellow-billed Cuckoos often replace some or all of their tail feathers in their first winter prebasic molt (Pyle 1997), so this criterion cannot be used to accurately age the bird. In the present case, the good condition of both the gray and dark tail feathers, with little wear, suggest that the bird is a juvenile with relatively fresh plumage. Presumably, the bird died late in the late fall or during the winter, was buried in the snow, and resurfaced the following spring upon snowmelt. The dehydrated state of the carcass indicates freeze-drying. By comparison, the recent Pincher Creek bird had the tail markings of an AHY bird.

The observation of Yellow-billed Cuckoos in two separate time windows (summer and fall-winter) suggests that perhaps different means or different sources of birds were involved. There are two recognized subspecies of Yellow-billed Cuckoo in North America. The eastern subspecies, *C. a. americanus*, breeds from North Dakota east to New Brunswick and south to western Texas and Florida, while the western subspecies, *C. a. occidentalis*, breeds from California to Colorado to western Texas (Pyle 1997). *C. a. americanus* is slightly smaller on average than *C. a. occidentalis*, but the differences are slight and identification is a complex function of bill length and depth, as well as wing and tail length, such that 10 to 25 % of birds of known sex cannot be separated conclusively (Pyle 1997). Based on the formula in Pyle, the 1968 Edmonton window-killed bird is of the eastern subspecies. Unfortunately, the subspecific affiliation of the

other specimens, and all photographs, cannot be determined because several critical measurements could not be made. Thus, a clearer understanding of the pattern of vagrancy of this species may have to await the study of additional material of Yellow-billed Cuckoos from adjacent jurisdictions.

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