

# Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*)

Yellow-billed Cuckoos are jay-sized birds with long tails. The bodies are grayish-brown on top and dull white below, their tails are long with two rows of four to six large white dots on the underside, and they show a flash of rufus on the wings when they fly.

The bill is curved downward with a black upper mandible and a yellow lower mandible.

Yellow-billed Cuckoos eat large quantities of hairy caterpillars. The diet also includes other large insects such as caterpillars, cicadas, grasshoppers, and crickets. In addition, they have been known to eat many other insects such as army worms, ants, wasps, flies, and dragonflies. So they are helpful in the control of insect pests in orchards.

Several of the earlier ornithologists accused this cuckoo of eating the eggs of other small birds, but modern observers seem to think that they do very little, if any, nest robbing.

They do occasionally eat snails, small vertebrates such as frogs and lizards, and some fruits and seeds.

They forage by waiting motionless for long periods, watching for prey to move. Then they make running, hopping dashes to catch the prey. They will work a hairy caterpillar back and forth through the bill before swallowing, possibly to aid in removing hairs, *above right*.

While Corkscrew is not their preferred habitat, they appear whenever there is an infestation of caterpillars, especially Cypress Loopers and Fall Webworms.

They are seen or heard from the boardwalk from April through November, with the heaviest concentrations in May and October. Even in those two months, they have been observed an average of only 10 days. With heavy caterpillar populations, the numbers can soar to 24-25 days each month.

Originally, Yellow-billed Cuckoos were probably woodland birds, but like many other species, they learned to frequent human habitations where they could find an abundant food supply in shade trees, orchards, and gardens.

Favorite haunts are still in the woodland thickets where the tree growth is not too heavy, in brush-grown lanes, shady roadsides, dense thickets along small streams, and orchards in rural districts. They are seldom seen in dense heavy woods.

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo breeds in open woodlands with dense undergrowth and around water edges.

Unlike the European cuckoo, Yellow-billed Cuckoos usually build their own nests and rear their own young.



However, they are very poor nest builders and are often careless about laying in each other's nests.

Both parents build the nest, incubate the eggs, and brood the nestlings. They incubate and brood equally during the day, but the male takes the night shift. The male brings nest material every time he comes to the nest to take his turn. The female usually takes the offering and works it into the nest before leaving.

Young cuckoos develop very quickly. The entire period from egg laying to fledglings leaving the nest is only 17 days. Six or seven days after hatching, feathers of the young emerge; the nestlings are fully feathered in two hours. Parents feed their chicks regurgitated insects.

They begin to fly about 21 days after hatching. The male will usually take care of the first fledgling, and the female will care for the rest. Yellow-billed Cuckoos begin breeding after their first year.

Yellow-billed Cuckoos are fully migratory, flying at night in small groups or large flocks. They are trans-Gulf migrants as well as southeastward over Caribbean Islands. In spring, the Gulf coast peak is near the start of May.

Predators are raptors, including Red-shouldered Hawks. Nestlings and eggs are vulnerable to predation by snakes such as the Black Racer and birds such as Blue Jays and Common Grackles.



A Yellow-billed Cuckoo defoliates a hairy caterpillar before eating it.

