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2009

Birds of the Great Plains: Family Cuculidae (Cuckoos, Roadrunners, and Anis)

Paul A. Johnsgard

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, pajohnsgard@gmail.com

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Johnsgard, Paul A., "Birds of the Great Plains: Family Cuculidae (Cuckoos, Roadrunners, and Anis)" (2009). *Birds of the Great Plains (Revised edition 2009)* by Paul Johnsgard. 30.

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FAMILY CUCULIDAE
(CUCKOOS, ROADRUN-
NERS, AND ANIS)



Yellow-billed Cuckoo

Yellow-billed Cuckoo *Coccyzus americanus*

Breeding Status: This species is a rather common breeder through the wooded areas of the southern half of this region, extending northward through eastern Nebraska and Iowa into southeastern South Dakota and southwestern Minnesota. There are no definite breeding records for North Dakota, but a few records of birds in summer have accumulated.

Breeding Habitat: Moderately dense thickets near watercourses, second-growth woodlands, deserted farmlands overgrown with shrubs and brush, and brushy orchards are favored habitats for this species. It avoids extremely dense woods.

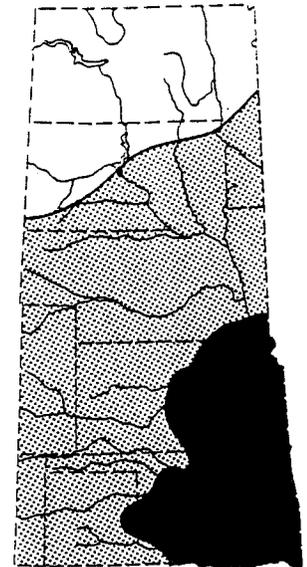
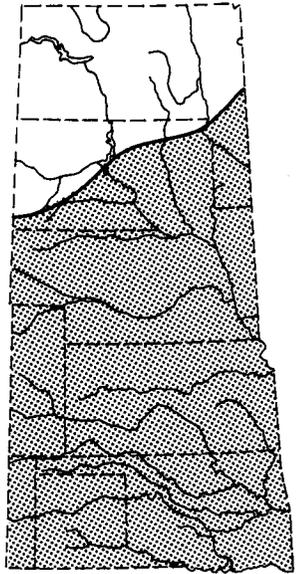
Nest Location: Nests are frail, shallow platforms placed 2-20 feet above the ground, usually 4-8 feet high on horizontal limbs of hardwood trees, well concealed by surrounding foliage. There is usually a thin lining of soft vegetation.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 2 to 5 eggs (54 Kansas clutches averaged 3.1). The eggs are pale greenish blue, gradually fading to yellowish. The incubation period has been estimated as 14 days, probably starting before the clutch is complete. Possibly double-brooded, at least in Oklahoma and other southern areas.

Time of Breeding: Kansas egg records are from May 11 to September 10, with a peak in early June. Oklahoma egg dates are from May 14 to August 11, and dates in Texas are from March 22 to September 5.

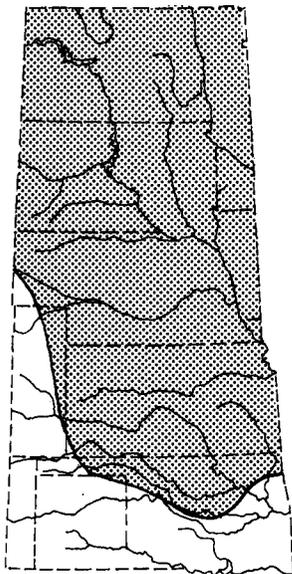
Breeding Biology: Cuckoos are relatively late spring migrants, arriving in Minnesota in May or even early June and inconspicuously taking up breeding territories. Their distinctive clucking and repeated hollow notes of *kaw* or *kowp* are frequently uttered, especially on cloudy days or at night. The birds gather nesting materials from trees by breaking off small branches and carrying them back one at a time to the nest. The eggs are laid at irregular intervals, and incubation apparently begins during the egg-laying period, since hatching is staggered. Apparently both sexes assist equally in incubation and also feed and brood the young. It has been suggested that when second broods are produced one parent may remain to tend the first brood while the other looks after the second clutch and brood. The young birds remain in the nest about 9 days but are still flightless when they leave the nest. At that time they are very agile in climbing about branches. When they leave the nest the young birds are somewhat more than half the adult weight; the most recently hatched and smallest young may be left alone in the nest, often to be neglected and even to starve.

Suggested Reading: Preble 1957; Bent 1940.



Black-billed Cuckoo

Coccyzus erythrophthalmus



Breeding Status: Breeds in wooded parts of nearly the entire region except for higher elevations of the Black Hills, extending southward to southern Colorado and northern Oklahoma. There are no breeding records for the Texas panhandle or New Mexico.

Breeding Habitat: This species occupies somewhat more densely wooded habitats than does the yellow-billed cuckoo and is more generally northern in its distribution. It seems to prefer extensive areas of upland woods that provide a variety of trees, bushes, and vines for nesting cover.

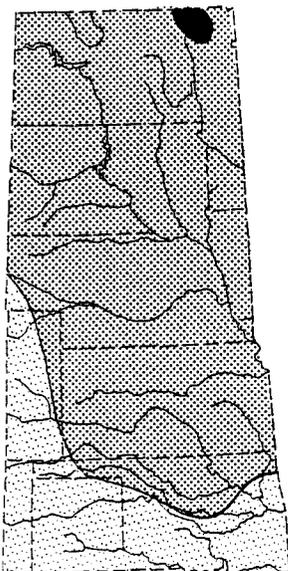
Nest Location: Nests are more substantial than those of the yellow-billed cuckoo and are on horizontal limbs situated from a few inches above the ground to about 20 feet high, but usually less than 6 feet above the ground. The nest is made of loosely interwoven twigs and has a substantial lining of softer materials.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: From 2 to 4 eggs (13 Kansas nests averaged 2.5). The eggs are a darker greenish blue and slightly smaller than those of the yellow-billed cuckoo; the two species sometimes lay in one another's nests and occasionally lay in the nests of other birds as well. The incubation period is only 10-11 days, beginning with the laying of the first egg, and hatching is staggered. Probably single-brooded.

Time of Breeding: Egg dates in North Dakota range from June 4 to June 20, with nestlings seen from June 20 to July 27. Kansas egg records are from May 21 to August 10, with a peak in early June, and Oklahoma records of eggs (or incubating females) extend from May 26 to June 20.

Breeding Biology: Black-billed cuckoos seek out nest sites that are well concealed by overhanging branches and leaf clusters, and they soon begin a protracted period of nest construction that may continue into the incubation period. Materials are gathered in the immediate vicinity, and eggs are laid at irregular intervals until the clutch is complete. Both sexes assist in incubation, and they usually make several changeovers each day. Hatching apparently is fairly rapid, and the newly hatched young emerge from the egg essentially dry, with a coal black, downless skin. Feeding begins almost immediately, and the young grow extremely rapidly, so that by 6-7 days after hatching they are able to leave their nests. At that age they are still relatively unfeathered and unable to fly, but they can run and climb with remarkable speed, thus eluding most predators. Initial flight occurs at 21-24 days.

Suggested Reading: Bent 1940; Spencer 1943.



Roadrunner

Geococcyx californianus

Breeding Status: Breeds throughout eastern New Mexico, the Texas panhandle, and all of Oklahoma but is more common westerly. It is locally uncommon breeder in southern Kansas and southeastern Colorado (Las Animas, Bent, and Baca counties).

Breeding Habitat: Roadrunners primarily frequent edge habitats provided by mixed open land and brush or forest and occasionally extend into either generally sparse or dense vegetation. They are found from near sea level to about 6,800 feet in Texas.

Nest Location: Nests are usually in low trees, thickets, or clumps of cactus, usually 3-15 feet above the ground, and rarely on the ground. The nest is built of sticks, with a lining of softer materials, and averages about a foot in diameter and 6-8 inches high. At least in desert regions it is constructed so that a band of shade crosses the nest during the middle of the day.

Clutch Size and Incubation Period: Normally 2-6 eggs (4 Kansas clutches averaged 4.5), but apparently double clutches of up to 12 eggs have been reported. The eggs are white with a chalky surface. Incubation begins soon after the first egg is laid and requires 17-20 days per egg. Since the eggs are laid at intervals of 1-3 days, the ages of the young in a nest vary greatly. Double-brooding is common, and three broods per year have occasionally been reported.

Time of Breeding: In Kansas, eggs are laid from at least early April to Mid-July. Oklahoma egg records extend from April 12 to September 4, and young are seen from early May to late September. Texas egg records extend from March 5 to October 10.

Breeding Biology: Roadrunners exhibit no obvious sexual differences in their plumage, but males have white skin in the unfeathered area immediately behind the eyes, whereas in females this area is pale blue. Courting males can also be recognized by various behavior patterns, including their distinctive cooing calls, often given from a perch, which attract and stimulate unmated females. Several other calls are uttered by males or by both sexes, and many visual displays are associated with territoriality and pair-formation. Before copulation the male performs a tail-wagging display and presents food. Nest-building lasts 3-6 days, and incubation begins with the first egg. Both sexes incubate, with the male incubating the entire night and part of the day. Fledglings remain in the nest about 12-13 days but do not fledge until they are 18-21 days of age. They become independent of their parents 30-40 days after leaving the nest.

Suggested Reading: Whitson 1975; Ohmart 1973.

