

Notes based on Joe Morlan's Ornithology class lecture March 4th, 2009.
Joe Morlan is not responsible for these notes, any errors or omissions in them are mine.

Feather ruffling: the tips of the feathers stick out in different directions, allows heat to escape from the skin, a cooling behavior.

Feather fluffing: the bird makes itself look like a ball and creates an air trap that insulates, a warming behavior.

Either one of those can change the shape of the bird.

Thick-billed Parrot

OCCURRENCE

The second naturally occurring parrot species in NA. Last recorded in 1938.

Flocks used to move into southeastern Arizona from Mexico, mostly in the mountains of the Sky Island region.

Endangered species, has declined in its native Mexico. Very unlikely that it will ever again come into the US on its own.

Confined to the Sierra Madre in Mexico.

Tears up pine cones with its really strongly hooked bill, pine nuts primary food source. Because pine nuts are erratic and irregular the bird has adopted a nomadic strategy.

If there is a pine cone crop failure after the pine cone crop has been pretty good there will be a lot of birds moving out of that area and looking for new sources of pine cones, same kind of phenomenon as in the crossbills.

The problem for the parrot is that those mountains in Mexico have virtually all been cleared up, there is no longer much suitable habitat close to the US.

The birds are illegally sold in Mexico, often confiscated at the border, if the customs officials know that it is an endangered species they ship it to the US Fish and Wildlife service in Laurel, Maryland, where they had a captive breeding program. They tried to "re"introduce the birds into southeastern Arizona. There is so much wrong with the whole project that its hard to know where to begin. The Thick-billed Parrot has never been documented to nest in Arizona, reintroducing it to a place where it never actually occurred as a breeding bird seems to be unwise. The other problem is that these birds were bred in captivity and they didn't know how to be wild parrots. The Thick-billed Parrot reintroduction program essentially turned into a Northern Goshawk feeding program.

FIELD MARKS

Rather large.

Bill big and dark (light in young birds).

Similar to Red-masked Parakeet, green body with red crown, bend of the wing and thighs.

Pretty big eye ring.

Red-crowned Parrot (and Green Parakeet)

(No slides)

Native to east Mexico, declined a lot there, probably because of habitat destruction and poaching for the pet trade. Established itself from escapes or releases in the Temple City area of LA.

Has spread through the LA basin all the way down into Orange County and quite a bit eastward. A total population of over 10,000 birds is established down there, 25-30 % of the world's population, too large to ignore. They are a city bird down there, habitat not comparable to native habitat.

Occur also in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. Two species of parrots have established themselves in urban areas there, the other is the **Green Parakeet**. These birds were added to the Texas list.

Green Parakeets occur just south of Texas by a few hundred miles.

Both birds are added onto the ABA checklist.

Budgerigar

Very small gentle parrot from Australia.

Highly social.

Feeds on grass and grains.

Very easy to keep in captivity, captive birds socialize very well.

Sweet chirping call, not particularly trainable for talking.

Cuckoos

A worldwide family of rather strange birds.

Get their name from the call of the European Cuckoo which goes cuc-coo. It is famous for laying its eggs in the nests of other birds. American cuckoos do not do that.

Cuckoos regularly eat hairy caterpillars, few other birds do. These caterpillars are usually inedible or cause stinging sensations to other birds.

Feet zygodactyl: two toes forward, two back (like in parrots, woodpeckers, some owls).

Mangrove Cuckoo

OCCURRENCE

A species of salt water mangroves in the Caribbean with a toehold in southern Florida, primarily the west coast, the southern part and the Keys. The Florida Keys is the place where it is most likely to be encountered. Even where the range map shows them as permanent residents they are more common in the summertime, extremely difficult to find in the wintertime.

One slide showed one in a Tamarisk, which is unusual for them in Florida but quite normal in the Bahamas.

Rather large birds with a lizard-like behavior, they like to sit quietly for long periods of time.

Once you see them you can keep track of them, they don't move a lot. Instead of hopping around in the branches they slither through the trees in a way that does not make the branches move.

Even though they are large and rather ungainly looking they slip through the vegetation in a way that tends to avoid detection.

FIELD MARKS

Resembles quite closely the Yellow-billed Cuckoo (but in different habitat).

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo is an abundant migrant in the spring and fall in the Florida Keys!

Lower mandible yellow.

Black mask to the eye.

Buff coloration down on the belly and undertail coverts, almost the same color as the back.

No contrasting panel in the wing coverts.

Pattern on the underside of the tail very similar to Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

Yellow-billed Cuckoo**OCCURRENCE**

Occupies river courses where there are willows and sycamores, also any kind of woodlot with lots of tall trees seems to be adequate.

Extremely widespread in the eastern US, the most common cuckoo through much of the East.

Highly migratory species, sometimes in Texas and Florida they even occur in flocks.

In the far west it has declined seriously, especially in CA, the western subspecies is listed as an endangered species in CA.

Formerly occurred throughout CA all the way up into Oregon and was common in riparian habitat along the Colorado River. Those days are long gone. The cottonwoods have all been cut down along the Colorado River to make room for trailer parks. The Central Valley was a major area for Yellow-billed Cuckoos. It used to flood, used to be choked with cottonwoods, alders and willows and blackberry tangles and in fact was a major jungle. It was only with the California Water Project that the flooding stopped and they were able to clear that land for agriculture. It is now a major bread basket of the world, the soil remains very rich. A lot of this is getting developed now for housing and we are losing some important agricultural areas. The birds are essentially gone from the Central Valley. These cuckoos need a wide strip, not just one row of trees, it needs to be acres wide.

The Kern River preserve appears to be the last bastion in CA. It is a huge riparian area with lots of habitat.

Occasionally migrants are seen along the coast, Joe has seen a couple at Pt Reyes in the spring and in the fall.

The latest migratory birds to arrive in CA. They are never there until late May, frequently not until early June. Nesting season is over by the end of July for these birds.

Seeing cuckoos is always a challenge, hearing them is something you are more likely to be successful with.

In the east they are specialists on tent caterpillars which build big webs in the trees. The webs are full of caterpillars and those caterpillars have bristles all over them. When there is a tent caterpillar outbreak the cuckoos will be all over the place.

They are still pretty common and are not that hard to see in Arizona.

FIELD MARKS

Some rusty in the wings.

Undertail pattern bold spangled black and white.

VOCALIZATIONS

Kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk, almost like a Pied-billed Grebe. Fairly distinctive and loud.

Black-billed Cuckoo

OCCURRENCE

In general quite a bit rarer than the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, even in places where Black-billed Cuckoos are common they are vastly outnumbered by Yellow-billed Cuckoos.

Not particularly common, often you look for them in migration in Texas and consider yourself lucky to see one a day, while seeing 20 or 30 Yellow-billed Cuckoos on the same day. In Florida quite scarce.

Range further to the northwest, so there they outnumber the Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

In CA a world class rarity.

One seen by Joe at Pt Reyes was feeding on the caterpillars of the great spotted tiger moth which infest willow thickets in the fall.

FIELD MARKS

A little smaller than the Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

All brown on the upper parts.

Red eye ring (yellow in younger birds).

No rusty in the wings (but younger birds will show faint reddish edges to the wings).

Young birds buffy on throat and undertail coverts (in Mangrove Cuckoo the belly is the darkest part).

All dark bill, shorter and smaller than Yellow-billed Cuckoo, not particularly substantial.

Undertail pattern different: basically all gray.

VOCALIZATIONS

Ho-ho-ho, like a Least Bittern.

Greater Roadrunner

Large ground-cuckoo which feeds mostly on lizards and snakes. They catch lizards which are very hard to chase and catch (snakes are easy), herpetologists use a noose to chase lizards. Are also known to eat birds, Joe once saw one swallowing a White-crowned Sparrow. 100% carnivores.

In Mexico there is a smaller one called the Lesser Roadrunner.

OCCURRENCE

Common in the desert southwest, ranging in the arid foothills of the Central Valley as far north as Red Bluff and Redding.

In the Bay Area Roadrunners formerly occurred all the way to the coast but are now restricted to the East Bay or really the foothill region south of Livermore. Used to occur in the East Bay in Tilden Regional Park up until the 1940s. Probably the introduction of feral cats had an impact on these birds. They are marginal in the Santa Clara Valley, mostly in the southern parts of it, in places like Henry Coe State Park. In northern CA Joe has seen them most often along Interstate 5 heading south through Fresno County. There is a lot of tumbleweed there and in August he has seen them sitting along the fences, often with their bushy tail and crest cocked in the air. Those are mostly young birds that are recently hatched. Another place where people look for Roadrunners is Panoche Valley, especially the passes in and out of the valley.

In southern CA they almost reach the coast.

FIELD MARKS

In the breeding season a postocular patch, red, white and blue.

Very strong legs, an adaptation for racing around on the ground.

Long tail adaptation for making quick twists and turns, they turn on a dime.

VOCALIZATIONS

They do a lot of bill clapping.

Vocalization dove-like mourning hoo-hoo-hooo-hooo.

They do respond to tape recordings, along mile post 11 along Mines Road south of Livermore is a place where a pair of roadrunners used to be until they got taped out.