

# Yellow-billed Cuckoo at-risk along the Sacramento and Feather rivers, California

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The western population of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo was recently granted protection as a threatened species under the Endangered Species Act. This cuckoo breeds exclusively in forests growing along rivers and streams in the Western United States. These once vast forests have been nearly completely lost, converted to farms and cities.

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo, a bird similar in size to the more common Mourning Dove, breeds in North America and migrates to South America for the winter. In California they breed only in a handful of locations and the Sacramento Valley is one of the few areas remaining with a breeding population in the state. To gather current information on this population we conducted surveys along the Sacramento and Feather rivers.

Conducting surveys for this secretive bird requires a special technique. Biologists use a recording of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo voice to elicit a

response that allows us to detect the birds.

In the summers of 2012 and 2013 we conducted extensive surveys covering nearly 50% of the potential habitat along the rivers. During these surveys, we found only a handful of cuckoos (8-10) along the Sacramento River and none along the Feather River.

Ten cuckoo surveys similar to ours have been conducted since 1972. Although the survey techniques have evolved during this time, we made simple comparisons between our surveys and previous ones. In summary, we found extremely low numbers of cuckoos in recent years – the lowest ever reported.

In the Sacramento Valley, the need for increasing the amount of forest along the rivers to help wildlife, including cuckoos, has long been recognized and since the late 1980s thousands of acres of forest have been restored and are providing habitat for a number of species.

While habitat loss is presumably the cause of the original Yellow-billed Cuckoo decline, it appears that the cuckoo population is not currently recovering despite large-scale restoration. Further research is needed to identify the most important factors we can address to help this species, emblematic of Western rivers, recover.

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## Main Points

Very few Yellow-billed Cuckoos occupy suitable habitat along the Sacramento River.

No Yellow-billed Cuckoos were found along the Feather River.

Restoration of riparian forest has increased the area of potential habitat for Yellow-billed Cuckoo.

Currently, habitat availability does not appear to be the limiting factor for this population.

Dettling, M.D., N.E. Seavy, C.A. Howell, and T. Gardali. 2015. [Current status of Western Yellow-billed Cuckoo along the Sacramento and Feather rivers, California](#) PLOS ONE. DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0125198