

Your name

Ed McVicker

Email

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Bird identification

Yellow-billed Cuckoo (YBCU)

A single bird in adult plumage. Sex and age not known.

Seen with Bob Lockett who is submitting a separate report.

Date(s)

June 25, 2019

Time of Day

10:02 a.m.

Location

The sighting occurred in Grand Island Greenway St. Pk., SE Upper Island Rd. on the south end of Grand Island, Yamhill Co. From the parking area we walked southeast to the second opening overlooking the Willamette R. We were standing on the bank ~20' above the Willamette R. looking south through an opening in the trees and over the blackberry bramble when we both spotted the bird flying out of the trees to our right. The precise location was 45 06 8.5N, 123 01 9.3W.

The park is primarily broad leaf forest bordered on two sides by Lambert Slough and the Willamette River. The forest is dominated by large cottonwood and Oregon ash trees and multiple willows (unknown species.) The beginning of Lambert Slough off the Willamette is in the forest along the Greenway and runs along the island's west side ~4 miles. It is lined on both sides continuously with large broadleaf deciduous trees and good riparian habitat. We mused on the possibility of detecting YBCU in this area which reminded us of eastern/midwestern forests where we have both previously seen and heard YBCU.

Our primary target bird was Red-eyed Vireo - a habitat good for YBCU, too.

Lighting and Weather Conditions

There were some high clouds with clearing conditions from early morning showers. By 10:00 it was mostly sunny with the sun high and to our left as we looked south. Viewing conditions were good.

Details

I played a recording of the YBCU's ku-ku-ku-ku-kddowl-kddowl song. On the first note the bird flew from the cottonwood/ash/willow trees on our right heading down river across the opening in front of us. It then dropped below us before disappearing behind smaller willow & brambles to the left. Viewing distance was ~30' for about 2-3 sec. Bob Lockett was standing to my right and had a longer view allowing him to see the bird turn and fly across the river entering the trees on the other side. Following are the characteristics I observed and my conclusions.

Physical characteristics:

long and somewhat narrow, pointed wings;

long tail that appeared to taper;

grayish-brown above (wings, back, head) and clean white body below creating high contrast between top and bottom;

head projected well in front of the wings with a large, flat-headed look.

bill was long and pointed;

flight was strong and smooth, fast but not rushed or hurried. I observed perhaps two-three flapping cycles;

I did not see bill or tail details nor rufous in the primaries.

Flight:

distinct shape, size and jizz of the bird was noted as it flew across my view from right to left;

in flight the bird looked elongated with agile movement and very smooth wing stroke;

much larger and longer than songbirds (Cedar Waxwings, Robins, Pewees, swallows, sparrows) we were seeing in area;

wings, tail and head shapes provided a long, slender and pointy overall impression;

flight was direct and strong.

Similar Species

Other than Black-billed Cuckoo, there isn't a North American native bird similar to YBCU. I can't eliminate the very remote possibility of BBCU because I did not see any bill or primary feather detail of the flying bird.

I do remember instantly eliminating common local birds of a roughly similar size:

Common Nighthawk - similar size but very different jizz-shape and flight profile. CONI wings much longer, stiffer

Sharp-shinned Hawk - too bulky with rounded wings and heavy look

Kestrel - wrong overall impression, not pointy and slender enough

Crow - bulkier, heavier with different shaped wings and tail.

Additionally, all of these comparably sized birds do not match the color scheme of YBCU.

Upon reflection I suppose aspects of the YBCU flight jizz (especially the tail shape and color) might resemble a Mourning Dove; however, a MODO would appear smaller overall with a different flight profile (flatter wings on YBCU and more curled, arching, shorter wing shape with hurried flapping of MODO.) MODO also lacks the dark-over-light contrasting color of YBCU.

Anything else you want to add?

The view was too quick for photos. We waited an hour and twice repeated playback but did not see the bird nor hear it vocalize.

I am familiar with the bird in flight, its appearance and its general habits of silence and stealth. I have photographed and heard the bird in eastern and midwestern forest settings and observed it actively feeding in an atypical manner in Florida. Also, I have a memorable experience watching a YBCU trying to approach and land on an off-shore cruise ship (Georgia) allowing extended views and photographs of the flying bird.

Your name

Robert Lockett

Email

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Bird identification

Yellow-billed Cuckoo (1)

Date(s)

6/25/19

Time of Day

10:02 am (sighting). We stayed at the site until 11:00 am hoping to hear or see the bird again, but were not successful. We returned in the afternoon for about 45 minutes, joined by Bill Tice and Don Bird, but again failed to detect the bird.

Location

Grand Island Greenway, on trail from parking area to river. Bird was seen at the river. GPS coordinates for the site are 45° 6' 8.597"N, 123° 1' 8.382"W.

Lighting and Weather Conditions

Partial clouds, but good light from behind or the sides of observers.

Details

Ed McVicker and I walked the trail to the first view of the river. Stopping there, Ed decided to try playback of YBCU since the habitat and time of year seemed right. After one playback I noted movement low in some Oregon Ash and Cottonwood about 30' to our right. Then a bird flew from that area and crossed in front of us and somewhat below our level. It may have seen us, as it quickly changed direction and flew directly away from us across the river, where it landed in a willow and disappeared. We both exclaimed, "cuckoo!" at the same time. I saw a medium-sized bird, with a body approximately the size of a robin, but with very different proportions and coloration. The tail was quite long, as were the wings. Crown, nape, back, tail, and much of the wings was a rich reddish brown of medium darkness, and without streaking or spotting. I noticed strong rufous tints in the primaries. Neither of us noticed tail

spots. Flight was strong and direct, not rising and falling like a woodpecker. After the bird disappeared we tried playback about once every ten or fifteen minutes, hoping for a response and prepared to record the bird if it responded. Unfortunately, it never vocalized in our presence.

Similar Species

It's difficult to imagine what else this bird could have been. The long wings and tail and overall coloration rule out common birds such as robin, Swainson's thrush, or flicker. Ed mentioned Common Nighthawk as vaguely possible based on the long wings, but we both ruled it out because of the long tail, warm brown coloration, and strong direct flight with no hint of a nighthawk's buoyancy.

Anything else you want to add?

Both Ed and I have seen Yellow-billed Cuckoos in Texas, Florida, and/or New York, in addition to other cuckoo species, so are certainly familiar with the appearance of cuckoos in general and YBCU specifically. We have talked about the possibility of hearing or seeing a Yellow-billed Cuckoo in Oregon, but this was a state bird for both of us.