



Yellow-billed Cuckoo/Kelly Colgan Azar (CC-BY-ND)

Publication Brief - Birds

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Title: Yellow-billed Cuckoo Surveys at Petrified Forest National Park - Final Report for the 2023 Field Season

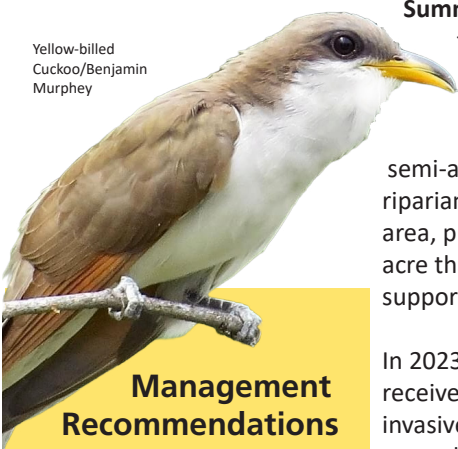
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Fremont Cottonwood leaf/Keir Morse-NPS

Inventory Program Overview: This project was funded by the [Inventory Program](#). They facilitate the collection of new data regarding species occurrence, abundance, or distribution to inform park management decisions and planning. The [Southern Colorado Plateau Network](#) and partners have conducted numerous [inventories](#) at many of the 19 national parks and monuments we proudly serve.



Yellow-billed Cuckoo/Benjamin Murphey

Summary: The Rio Puerco, which runs for more than 20 miles through [Petrified Forest National Park](#), provides a rare native cottonwood-willow riparian oasis in semi-arid northeastern Arizona. Desert riparian areas, though relatively small in area, provide more wildlife habitat per acre than the surrounding uplands and support higher biodiversity.

In 2023 Petrified Forest National Park received funding to plan the removal of invasive species and to restore a more natural plant community along the Rio Puerco. In 2024 and 2025, the park will begin receiving funding through the Inflation Reduction Act of 2023 (HR 812) to initiate restoration work. A crucial part of this plan is to survey for the threatened [Yellow-billed Cuckoo](#) and document their abundance and areas of use along the Rio Puerco, so that short-term negative impacts to this species may be avoided during restoration.

The Yellow-billed Cuckoo is a riparian obligate species, meaning they depend entirely on riparian habitat for breeding purposes. Since riparian areas have been declining in the southwest, so to have the population of Yellow-billed Cuckoos. Making sure land management activities do not interfere in their breeding cycle is a vital part to their recovery.



Typical riparian habitat along the Rio Puerco consists mostly of salt cedar and Russian olive, with occasional cottonwoods. Photo by Steven Albert.

The Southern Colorado Plateau Networks partner, The Institute for Bird Populations, conducted four surveys throughout the breeding season. The first survey had no detections. The second survey had two detections, comprised of single birds at two separate points. The third survey also had two detections, comprised of single birds at two separate points. The fourth survey had no detections. There was no breeding behavior observed, and it is unknown whether these cuckoos were transient individuals or local breeders.

Mindful restoration techniques that could be used to enhance important attributes of cuckoo breeding habitat in this area have the potential to make this a very important and much needed place for cuckoos, in a region where not much riparian habitat occurs.

Management Recommendations

- Continue to survey for Yellow-billed Cuckoos to help determine if breeding is occurring.
- Do not conduct restoration work in areas where cuckoos were sighted during the breeding season (July 1 - August 30).
- Use restoration techniques that encourage natural succession and the creation of new habitat. Pay particular attention to fostering vegetation in the mid-story, an important element in cuckoo nesting habitat.