



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

Black-billed Cuckoo *Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The Black-billed Cuckoo is a neotropical migrant bird that is particularly elusive due to its skulking behavior, making it a much more common to hear rather than see this bird. The species can be distinguished from the similar Yellow-billed Cuckoo by both subtle plumage and vocalization characteristics. Cuckoos are well known to be voracious predators of caterpillars (especially pest species like tent caterpillars and gypsy moth larvae), and they initiate nesting coinciding with caterpillar and cicada outbreaks. Black-billed Cuckoos have a very fast nesting cycle that includes an 11 day incubation and 7 day nesting period.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: Their breeding range includes eastern and central portions of the northern United States and southern Canada. In Massachusetts, the Black-billed Cuckoo was at its peak abundance when farmland dominated the landscape and was thought to be particularly beneficial in orchards where they controlled pest species. Their population declined as the majority of farmland habitat was either developed or regenerated to forest. Data from both the Breeding Bird Survey and the Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas 2 indicate the decline of this species has continued over the last 45 years (Walsh and Petersen 2013, Sauer et al. 2014).

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: Breeding habitat for the Black-billed Cuckoo includes areas of dense understory such as forest edges and thickets, often associated with wet areas (e.g., bogs, marshes, riparian areas). They are most common in brushy areas within deciduous or mixed forest types but are also documented nesting within coniferous forests. Although their nesting habitat is similar to that of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo, the Black-billed Cuckoo is found more frequently in areas with extensive woodlands.

THREATS: The primary threat to Black-billed Cuckoos in Massachusetts is loss and degradation of breeding habitat. Loss and fragmentation of young forest habitat is particularly acute in Massachusetts. Because of the species tendency to forage on caterpillars in orchards, they may be especially susceptible to pesticide contamination. Other threats include collisions with human-made structures and an increase in mortality associated with elevated numbers of mesopredators, including domestic cats.

REFERENCES:

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- Veit, R., and W.R. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*. Massachusetts Audubon Society, Lincoln, Massachusetts.
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A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

1 Rabbit Hill Rd., Westborough, MA; tel: 508-389-6300; fax: 508-389-7890; www.mass.gov/dfw

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