

The glut of sightings in the 1980s briefly transformed the status of this species for a generation of rarity seekers, especially so for annual trippers to Scilly. This comparative excess is now a distant memory, with the last British record making landfall for two days almost two decades ago in 1990. Against a backdrop of declines in North America and changing weather patterns at key times of year for transatlantic vagrancy this species seems destined to remain a rarity of considerable magnitude for the foreseeable future. One reached the Azores in 2006. In doing so it offered a sliver of hope to a modern generation of birdwatchers that a future weather system might deliver another to Britain.

Yellow-billed Cuckoo *Coccyzus americanus*

(Linnaeus, 1758). Breeds across southern Canada from British Columbia to New Brunswick, and throughout the USA to central Mexico. Winters in South America south to Argentina.

Monotypic.

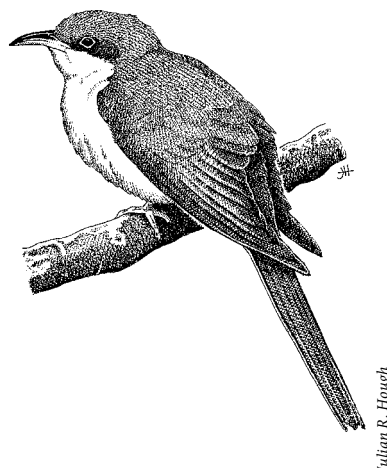
Rare, markedly irregular and decreasing vagrant across the North Atlantic, mostly in late autumn.

Status: The total of 68 birds recorded to the end of 2007 comprises 59 in Britain and nine in Ireland.

Historical records: A total of 17 occurred prior to 1950, nearly all of which were shot or found dead. The first was killed near Youghal, Co. Cork, in autumn 1825. This was followed by nine more between 1832 and 1899, including the first British record shot in autumn 1832 at Stackpole Court, Pembrokeshire. Seven further records fell between 1901 (two) and 1940.

The first of the modern recording era was a 1st-winter female found moribund at Exnaboe, Shetland, on 1st November 1952. The 1950s produced seven birds, no fewer than five of them from Scotland plus one from Yorkshire and one in East Sussex, a distribution of records at variance with expected arrival locations during recent times. These included a peculiar arrival of four in 1953, three of which occurred between 3rd and 11th October, including one on the Inner Hebrides on the west coast of Scotland and singles in Angus and Dundee, and Moray and Nairn which coincided with a Black-billed Cuckoo on Shetland. A bird in mid-November of that year frequented a garden close to the Yorkshire coast and was the first individual to delight an audience.

A Yellow-billed Cuckoo (Coccyzus americanus) occurred at Cloughton, near Scarborough, Yorkshire, from November 14th to 17th, 1953, and was seen by E. H. Ramskir, R. S. Pollard, E. A. Wallis, R. M. Garnett, myself and others. It was photographed in colour, and filmed, by W. R. Grist. There had been a local plague of white butterflies, the larvae of which had crawled up the sides of Mr. Ramskir's house to pupate. The cuckoo frequently



fluttered to the house walls and sides, and was watched as it searched for pupae, it even took insects from the frames of windows through which it was watched a few feet away.

Ralph Chislett. *British Birds* 47: 173

The 1960s added five more birds to the total, all but one in West Sussex in western locations with singles in Scilly, Co. Cork, Co. Mayo and Argyll.

Ten more birds arrived in the 1970s (at that time easily the best tally of any decade). Records again came from far-reaching points of the compass. One was on the east coast of Scotland. Three were in England between East Yorkshire and Suffolk, including an inland bird found dead at Welton le Marsh, Lincolnshire, on 30th October 1978. Five were found between Hampshire and Scilly and one in Ireland.

The 1980s – a classic decade for Nearctic vagrants – broke all records by delivering no fewer than 18 birds, including a record five in 1985 and four in 1989. These birds conformed to modern expectations: five in Scilly, three from Devon and two for Cornwall. Singles were logged from Hampshire and the Isle of Man. In Ireland, Co. Waterford, Co. Cork and Co. Donegal shared the spoils. The solitary east coast record was from coastal Suffolk. Most noteworthy were inland surprises in South Yorkshire (a moribund bird at Armthorpe on 14th November 1981) and in Lincolnshire (Rauceby Warren from 18th-19th October 1987).

The 1980s boom failed to extend into subsequent decades. Nine arrived in the 1990s and just two since 2000. The records from the 1990s were another disparate bunch with three in the southwest (two from Scilly; one in Cornwall) and one in Pembrokeshire, plus singles in Orkney and Co. Antrim. Another east coast bird dropped in to Morpeth, Northumberland, on 22nd October 1995. Other inland birds included one in Bedfordshire (recently dead, Sandy, 6th December 1990) and in Surrey (caught and ringed, Oxted, 17th October 1991).

Both individuals of the new millennium conformed to modern geographical expectations, appearing in Scilly and Cornwall.

Where: As would be expected for a Nearctic vagrant the bulk of sightings have been from the southwest, though there are a good number of records from counties adjoining the English Channel and a decent tally along the east coast. The Isles of Scilly has amassed 12 records and Cornwall eight (five since 1971). Four have graced Lundy and four more were recorded in Hamp-

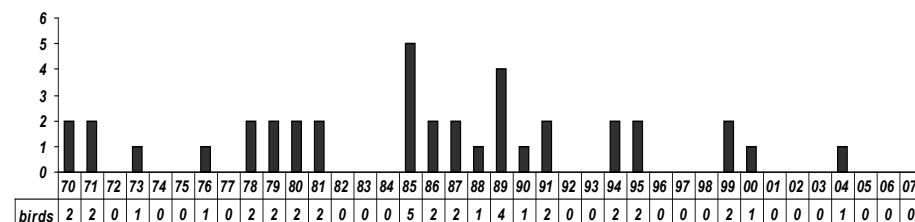


Figure 3: Annual numbers of Yellow-billed Cuckoos, 1970-2007.