

Plovers: Two Beauties In Egypt

By **Jerry Theis**, Sonoran Audubon Society Board
Member and Global Bird Reporter for Gambel's Tales

Shorebirds, or waders, include sandpipers, snipes, lapwings, plovers, etc. and are primarily birds of shorelines and open areas. They walk or wade while feeding. Plovers are plump-breasted with long wings, moderately long legs, short necks and straight bills. Many feed while running along shorelines while others like the Killdeer are chiefly insectivorous. Most plover nests are a slight hollow in the ground where 2-5 spotted eggs are laid. Unusual among plovers are the Egyptian Plover and the Crab Plover, not just because they exhibit very colorful plumage, or because they each are in their own monotypic family, Pluvianidae and Dromadidae respectively, but because of their bizarre nesting habits.

In April, 2016 I ventured to Ethiopia with Birding Africa Birding Tours and our local guide had saved the Egyptian Plover as our final day adventure. He promised us about a 60% chance of seeing the bird based on recent rains. As we scanned a large river in Giba Gorge, he spotted the plover along the far shore a long distance away. Scope views highlighted this striking unmistakable species. The Egyptian Plover is about 20 cm. long. The adult has a black crown, back, eye-mask and breast band. The rest of the head is white. The remaining upper parts are blue-gray, as are the legs. The underparts are orange. In flight it is even more spectacular, flight feathers showing brilliant white crossed by a black bar. After landing, members of a pair greet each other by raising their wings in an elaborate ceremony, showing off the black and white markings. Egyptian Plovers are residents of tropical sub-Saharan Africa, found in pairs or small groups near water, breeding on sandbars in very large rivers or around lakes where insects are plentiful. They are generally sedentary, but may respond to water level changes with local movements.

Egyptian Plover's 2-3 eggs are not incubated by the adult bird, but are buried in warm sand, the temperature control being achieved by the adult



Egyptian Plover

Photo Credit: [Frans Vandewalle](#) (CC BY-NC 2.0)

sitting on the eggs with a water-soaked belly to cool them if needed. When the adult leaves the "nest," it smooths sand over the eggs. The chicks are precocial, running as soon as hatched and feeding themselves shortly afterwards. Adults cool the chicks the same way as with the eggs. Chicks may even drink water from the adult's belly feathers. When danger threatens, adults bury the chicks in the sand temporarily! The Egyptian Plover is the well-known "crocodile bird" of the writings of Herodotus, entering the Nile crocodile's mouth to pick decaying meat lodged between the reptile's teeth, a symbiotic relationship we did not witness as present day observations of this behavior are lacking.

The Crab Plover is so distinctive that it may be related to thick-knees, pratincoles, or even auks and gulls. They are long-legged, black and white birds of Indian Ocean coasts. On a Rockjumper birding tour in Madagascar in October, 2019, we headed to Nosy Ve, an island off the SW coast. To get to our boat moored far from shore, we boarded wooden carts pulled by Zebu cattle! We were fortunate to see a flock of Crab Plovers, tame, noisy 16 in. long waders. The Crab Plover adult is gleaming white with a black back, black flight feathers and a dark bill. The bill is large, strong, laterally compressed and pointed. A narrow dark smudge around the eye imparts a sleepy appearance. They have a hunched posture on land. Crab Plovers flock on beaches, reefs, coral

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outcrops, rocky coasts, lagoons, sandbanks, mudflats, estuaries, and mangroves, and are never never found inland. They hunt molluscs, worms, and especially crabs, which they break up by pounding them with their heavy bills.

Crab Plovers dig burrows about 3-5 feet deep in sandbanks and lay a single large white egg. They nest colonially, each pair fashioning a nest chamber at the end of a narrow tunnel. The downy young are fed in the burrow by both parents. These plovers also are unique among waders by making use of ground warmth to aid in the incubation of eggs.



Crab Plover

Photo Credit: [Zak Pohlen](#) ([CC BY-NC-SA 2.0](#))

Green Cochoa: A Cambodian High Altitude Birding Adventure

By **Jerry Theis**, Sonoran Audubon Society Board
Member and Global Bird Reporter for Gambel's Tales

When my Honduras trip canceled in February, 2019, I immediately joined another Birdquest trip, to Cambodia, with Craig Robson (author of THE guide to birds of SE Asia) as our guide. Birdquest has a reputation as a hard driving tour company with ambitious guides and long days. And with an itinerary including a hike up the tallest peak in Cambodia, I knew I was in for quite an adventure. Craig enticed us with visions of Cambodian Laughingthrush (a country endemic and a first for Birdquest), Chestnut-headed Partridge (a country near-endemic) and Green Cochoa, a gorgeously colored but highly elusive and uncommon bird.

Phnom Aural in the Cardamom Mountains is called the roof of Cambodia, where backpackers and trekkers come to challenge their skills. We made the long drive from Kratie to be near the mountain, experiencing a local "homestay" in the extreme heat at Srei Kan Bei. Early the next morning we chugged our way to the mountain's base, lying on a wooden trailer pulled by a two-wheel walking tractor. From there we hiked uphill for seven hours in mostly steep terrain, weathering the heat and humidity, often experiencing smoke-filled air, while being brushed repeatedly with ash-covered foliage. Local porters hauled our tents and gear, as well as two free-range chickens, which became dinners along with the ever present rice (we also enjoyed sardines on toast over an open fire). With no residents on Mt. Aural, porters from the village are required to transport supplies. The "camp" was situated in broad-leaved evergreen forest near several small streams. We tent camped for four nights in cool air under the stars, spending each day birding the forests and streams. After our first night's respite, our guides asked if we wanted to spend the following day hiking to an even higher elevation, increasing our chances of seeing the cochoa, a venture which we respectfully declined.

We enjoyed lengthy spells near the main stream (also our daily bathing area) and one evening we

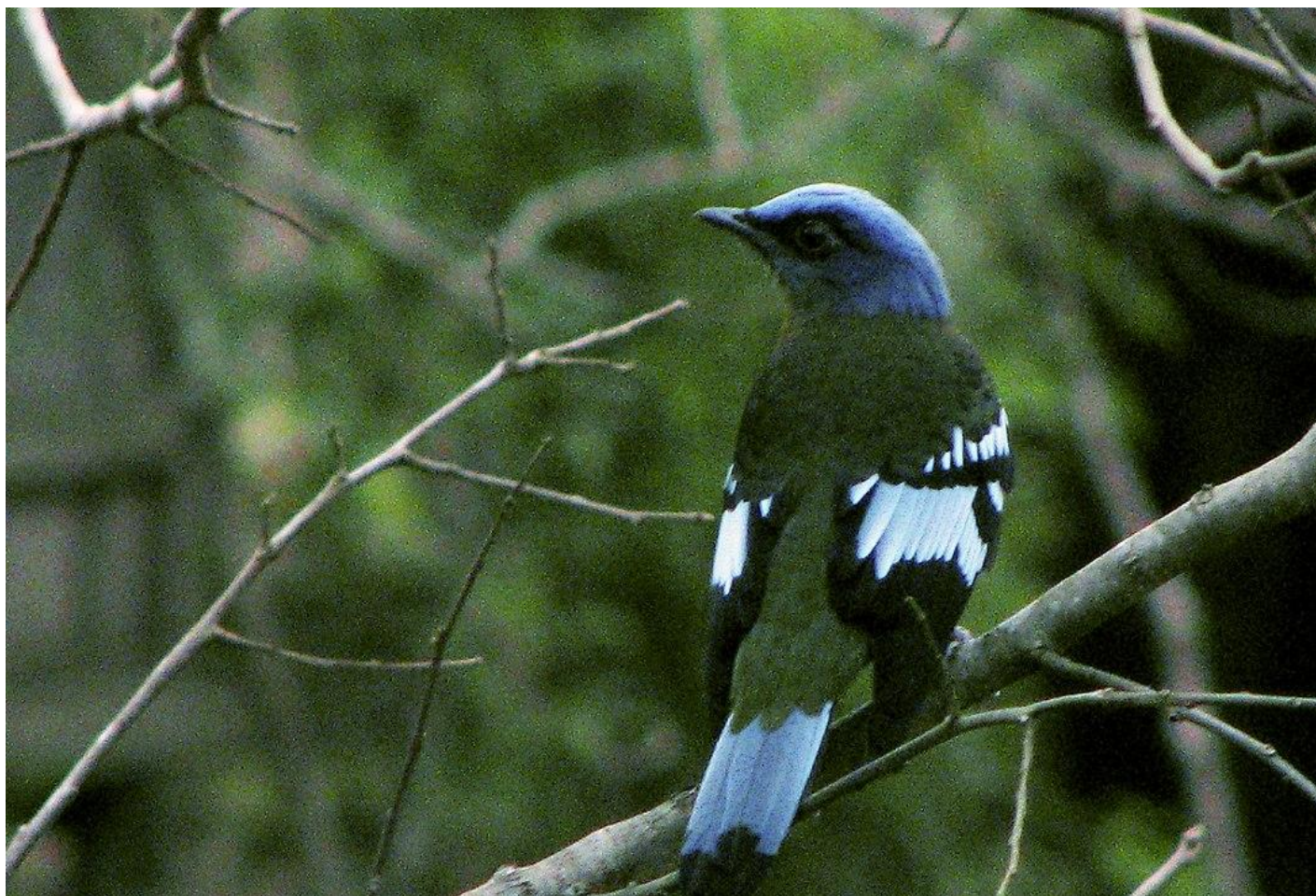
heard the telltale series of loud, pure, monotone whistles of the cochoa. The whistle is often given repeatedly but is difficult to pin down. However, we soon had great views of a male of the species, mainly green with a sky-blue crown and nape, a thin black eye stripe, silvery-blue markings on black wings, and a black-tipped blue tail, blending in well with the foliage. It is about 28 cm. long and feeds on berries and insects, as well as molluscs. The Green Cochoa has been placed variously with thrushes or old world flycatchers, currently considered closer to thrushes, and sometimes referred to as the Himalayan Thrush. It resides in China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos, at 700-2500 m. in elevation. It favors extensive dense, tall, moist, broad-leaved evergreen forests, particularly in areas with well shaded ravines, gullies, and streams, although it also occurs locally in limestone valleys. It is a lethargic forager in trees, undergrowth, and on the ground.

...AND A NOTE ABOUT IMPERILED LANDS: I was prepared for hot, humid weather but I would be remiss if I didn't re-visit my earlier comment on the smoke-filled air and ash-covered foliage, conditions less than desirable. Every January through March, vast numbers of small fires spring up across the countryside in SE Asia, especially in Cambodia (on February 3, 2019, aerial reconnaissance detected 1868 fires, significantly more than in neighboring countries). People light fires for many reasons, several of which we observed: subsistence farmers practice slash and burn to clear fields, disposing of harvested debris; individuals clear forests to collect mushrooms; loggers clear roads; families harvest resin from trees and honey from hives; and hunters drive reclusive animals into view with fire. All this smoke contains carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide and particulate matter (soot), degrading the local air quality. As we hiked, we were intermittently exposed to this air as our shoes, socks, and pants were being blackened with soot, as the temperatures soared into the 90's.

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Our trek down the mountain was quicker and easier, with thoughts of a shower at our hotel in Pursat ! Worldwide, there are 34 bird species with "sooty" in their name and 44 bird species with "ash" in their name, NONE of which we viewed !!



Green Cochoa

Photo Credit: [Umeshsrinivasan](#) (CC BY-SA 3.0)

Salt/Gila Rivers IBA Survey Areas - Recruiting Volunteer Surveyors

By **Bob McCormick**, Sonoran Audubon Society Board Member and IBA Coordinator

Sonoran Audubon Society has been conducting surveys at several sites on the Salt/Gila rivers since 2006. We are currently recruiting leaders and counters for these areas. Below is a short description of each site and the type of survey. The three types of surveys are Area search (record species within a specified boundary), Census (count from a stationary vantage point), and Transect (record each observation along a 2 km set line). Surveys are conducted December, January, March, and early April. SAS' 5 areas are...

B&M Wildlife Area: AREA SEARCH - Located just in front of the racetrack at Avondale (115th Ave) and Jimmy Johnson Trail (Baseline). This is probably the easiest survey as one just wanders about enjoying the area and recording species seen. Species like the Barn Owl under the bridge are outside of the area but are still included as a supplemental sighting. This survey takes about three hours and covers about two miles.

Jackie Meck Lake: CENSUS – Located at Estrella Park (Bullard and 143 Ave) this survey is conducted on top of a small hill overlooking about 10 gravel ponds. The ¼ mile hike up is short but very steep and very rocky. A spotting scope is needed to count the birds off the ponds. Amazing views are had from this vantage point. Movement of birds up & downstream are of importance on this survey as well as the 1000s of blackbirds roosting in the cattails along the river so early morning or late afternoon is best. This survey can be done in about an hour and there is a \$7 entry fee for the park.

Arlington: AREA SEARCH – Located about 3 ½ miles South of Arlington (12 miles S of Buckeye) this area consists of two ponds with the Gila River to the South. This is a great area to see Sandhill cranes and raptors in the AG fields on the way out. This survey takes about two hours plus drive time. It should also be stated that duck hunting is allowed here and you may encounter one of these groups of usually very friendly people with lots of knowledge of what is about so make sure to say



Red-winged Blackbird
Photo Credit: Bob McCormick

hi. Do NOT use playback for rails at this location.

Robbin's Butte: CENSUS –West of Highway 85 along the South of the Gila River lies Robbins Butte. A 3 mile dirt road leads in to the West side of the butte where a short hike (200 ft) leads up to the vantage point. This point consists of a large boulder covered in pictographs. This secluded area usually produces less than 20 species but the Butte can have a spectacular array of raptors using the updrafts off the mountain. This survey takes about an hour.

Tres Rios Recharge Basins: TRANSECT – This is the new Yellow-billed Cuckoo route and the IBA survey has not yet been officially set up. It is located just south of Southern on 107th Ave. The 2 km transect heads to the East along the Maricopa trail inside the Tres Rios recharge area. A Free permit is required by the City of Phoenix and the round trip comes to a little over 4 km (~3.5 miles) on a level dirt road. It can be done usually in 3 hours.

For anyone interested, I can set you up with forms, training and inspiration on how nice it is to be out in the desert in the winter in Arizona. For those who have participated before, and have enjoyed the opportunity to create important citizen science, please feel free to contact me at mcbobaz@aol.com.

Conserving Cuckoos and Arizona's Ribbons of Life

By **Tina Bickel** - Republished from February 2015
Gambel's Tales

The morning air is cool as rain from a monsoon shower drips from the thick canopy of cottonwood trees and falls into a shallow stream. "Ka, ka, ka, ka, ka, ka, kowlp, kowlp" rings out from a digital music player, and two birders silently watch and listen for a response. Suddenly, a Yellow-billed Cuckoo appears at the edge of the forest canopy, peering out to see who has so loudly barged into its territory. It is a lucky sighting for the birders, as these shy, secretive and rare birds are more frequently heard than seen. After enjoying the sighting, the citizen scientist birders record detailed notes, including a GPS point, and move on to the next survey location.

For several years, cuckoo surveys like this have been conducted at the Agua Fria National Monument, an Important Bird Area where SAS volunteers annually monitor bird populations. The surveys have been organized by Audubon Arizona and Bureau of Land Management, with help from a network of volunteers including several SAS members.

Information collected during these surveys is shared with USFWS, who listed the western distinct population segment (DPS) of Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus occidentalis*) as Threatened under the Endangered Species Act in 2014. This listing action may help save not only the cuckoo, but also some of Arizona's remaining riparian areas and the many other species, including humans, that depend on them.

Cuckoo Ecology

Western Yellow-billed Cuckoos over-winter in South America and return to the southwest so that nesting coincides with monsoon rains and the abundance of insect prey. Survey data show that they arrive in Arizona in mid-June, nest in early July, and begin their southward migration in late August.

Cuckoos are unique in their ability to eat toxic, hairy and spiny caterpillars, including tent caterpillars. The



Yellow-billed Cuckoo
Photo Credit: Bob McCormick

cuckoos' nest is a stick platform on a horizontal branch where usually two or three eggs are laid. The relatively large eggs allow for rapid development and the young hatch after about ten days. The altricial young are eating whole insects by their second day, and at only one week of age are already out of the nest crawling along tree limbs.

In the southwestern U.S., cuckoos are riparian obligates, requiring healthy cottonwood-willow riparian gallery forest habitat. These riparian areas are "ribbons of life" that support a remarkably high diversity of bird species, in addition to the cuckoo. A majority of Arizona's other vertebrate species also depend on riparian areas during at least part of their life cycles.

Cuckoo Conservation

Habitat loss is the primary cause of the decline in the cuckoo population, which was once abundant and locally common in Arizona. Because Arizona has lost approximately 90% of its original riparian habitat to human activities, the cuckoo is now absent from areas where it was once common, including large stretches of the lower Gila, lower Salt, and lower Colorado Rivers. Dams, water diversion, and urban/agricultural development have rendered these once vibrant riparian areas mostly lifeless. In spite of this, Arizona still has the largest population of

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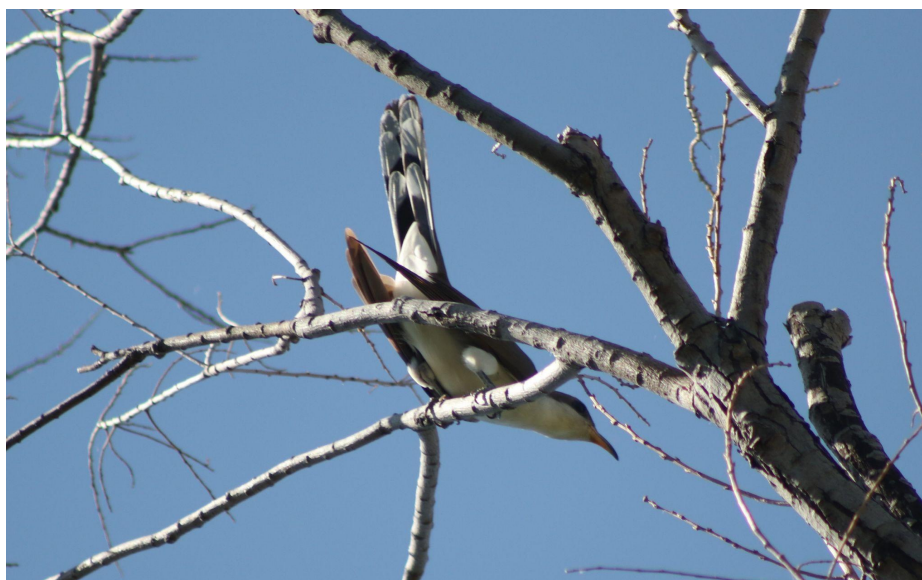
cuckoos in the western U.S.

Important stretches of precious riparian habitat in Arizona remain along the Agua Fria, San Pedro, and Verde Rivers, Sonoita Creek, and Tonto Creek above Roosevelt Lake. Unfortunately, these areas are vulnerable to habitat degradation. Groundwater pumping and aquifer depletion threaten the base flows of the Verde and San Pedro. If poorly managed, grazing cattle can alter vegetation and eliminate cottonwood and willow reproduction by eating and trampling seedlings, as well as by compacting soils. Tamarisk invasion replaces an ecologically complex cottonwood-willow forest with a monotonous and impoverished system that is much less likely to be used by cuckoos.

Fortunately, many of these areas are included in the USFWS's proposal to designate Critical Habitat for the cuckoo. Perhaps the recent listing of the cuckoo will be an important step toward protecting Arizona's "ribbons of life." Little Ash Creek offers some of the best cuckoo habitat in the Agua Fria National Monument, says Steven Prager of Audubon AZ.

Author's Note: Yellow-billed Cuckoo surveys will continue at the Agua Fria National Monument this summer to collect data that will help guide management of cuckoo habitat. Participants must be prepared for pre-dawn meeting times, intense midsummer heat and humidity, and rough terrain. Rewards include sightings of some of the 80-plus bird species seen so far on surveys, plus occasional sightings of other fascinating wildlife from Gila monsters to bobcats.

Please contact **Bob McCormick** mcbobaz@aol.com or **Tim Flood** tjflood@att.net if you'd like to participate.



Yellow-billed Cuckoo
Photo Credit: Bob McCormick

Updates on Tina Bickel's Article: SAS' Western Yellow-Billed Cuckoo Survey Internships

By **Karen LaFrance**, Sonoran Audubon Society Co-Chair and Editor

SAS is reprinting SAS Audubon Member **Tina Bickel's** excellent article on the Western Yellow-Billed Cuckoo because SAS continues to sponsor cuckoo counts. To encourage Audubon participation among young people, SAS has expanded the Chapter's role in this critical scientific data gathering project.

Year III Internships: In summer 2023, SAS' Year III of Cuckoo Survey Internships will take place. The program is partially funded by National Audubon, private donations and SAS' "leftover funds" from Year II. When interns complete this training, they are certified to do Endangered Species counts with the US Fish & Wildlife Service. "**McBob**" and **Tim Flood** are still leaders/guides and mentors for the interns and, as Tina mentioned in her 2015 article, other committed folks continue to volunteer with "McBob" and Tim on these surveys along with the interns.

Recruiting: SAS is currently seeking 2023 internship candidates. You may be interested yourself or you may know of a recent college graduate in the conservation sciences who might be interested. Successful completion of the internship can be done in one summer or can be completed in a second year. The program pays a stipend in the first year of surveying. Please contact, or refer folks to, the *Gambel's Tales* Editor at klaf40@gmail.com.

Interns: Bob McCormick's photo of the interns above is from summer 2021, the first year of the internships at SAS. Pictured at the Upper Agua Fria River survey route are 4 interns, **Kaylee Del Cid (SAS Board Member)**, **Mikaela Joerz**, **Dalton Sonnenberg** & **Emily Thomas** and two survey volunteers, **Grey Garton** & **Kathleen McCoy**. Several of the interns returned in summer 2022 to finish survey hours, one took a "real" job surveying cuckoos and another, Emily Thomas has volunteered to become a guide along with "McBob" and Tim Flood. Having another guide will help to increase the number of survey routes in Cuckoo habitats along



Yellow-billed Cuckoo Interns Year I
Photo Credit: Bob McCormick

rivers, streams and reclaimed riparian resources.

Steven Prager of Audubon Southwest (formerly Audubon AZ and Audubon NM) has mentored SAS with this program from the beginning, steering SAS toward potential funding and helping to recruit interns through ASU's Sun Devil Audubon college chapter. He has managed the USFWS permits, coordinated with the agencies on the two days' training required and has written the required interim and final reports. He has received a nice promotion to manage the Audubon Research Ranch in SE Arizona where SAS wishes him well.

Cathy Wise and **Tice Supplee** (SAS Founding Member) of Audubon SW will take on responsibility as Sonoran Audubon's National Audubon staff contacts for this program. Things come around! Cathy was a first cuckoo surveyor many years ago on the Upper Agua Fria River. She and others with the AZ Game & Fish Department trained several of us birding enthusiasts. We then went out into the field to do surveys. Welcome back to Cuckoos, Cathy!

SAS' Strategic Objective: SAS' Board's interest in, and support for, the Cuckoo Survey Training Internships is because it furthers a clear and important Chapter strategic objective: to bring younger folks into Audubon in all ways possible. SAS currently works on this

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objective in two ways:

a) through the Family Bird Walks at Maricopa County Parks. SAS Super Volunteers **Joe Ford** and **Tom Locascio**, guide these bird walks drawing 12-15 persons each time. Supported by the County Parks staff, these walks are a good way to introduce families to birds and birding; these walks are noted on the SAS Calendar at <https://sonoranaudubon.org/calendar/> and:

b) through the Cuckoo Surveys Internship Program which is a way to grab recent college graduates and attract them to Audubon! Indeed, the program is already reaping benefits to Audubon....

....**Interns' Lives After SAS Cuckoo Internships**: Intern **Emily Thomas**, is now Chair of Maricopa Audubon (MAS) Board of Directors and, as mentioned above, will be returning as a guide leader for new SAS cuckoo interns this year. MAS' Secretary is Intern **Jelena Grbic**. Finally, Intern **Kaylee Del Cid**, is on the SAS Board serving as Associate Editor of Gambel's Tales and Technical Support for the SAS Website and Constant Contact.



Yellow-billed Cuckoo Interns Year II
Photo Credit: Bob McCormick