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FIRST FLORIDA RECORD OF DARK-BILLED CUCKOO (*Coccyzus melacoryphus*)

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Some of the rarest vagrants to reach North America are "austral migrants," species that breed at southern latitudes and migrate north to winter in tropical and subtropical latitudes—a mirror image of the more familiar boreal migrants of North America and Eurasia. About 220 species of birds in South America are considered austral migrants (Chesser 1994). The handful of these species that have been recorded in North America presumably were misdirected either by overshooting their wintering grounds on their northbound migration in boreal spring, or by 180-degree reverse migration during their southbound migration in boreal fall, as McCaskie and Patten (1994) hypothesized for Fork-tailed Flycatchers (*Tyrannus savana*). Among these austral migrants is the Dark-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus melacoryphus*), which breeds in Uruguay and Argentina, and winters mostly in Colombia and Venezuela and Amazonian Brazil (Payne 2005). They are passage migrants in eastern Peru, Bolivia, and Paraguay. Resident populations also occur west of the Andes in Colombia, Ecuador, and the Galápagos Islands, and scattered throughout northern South America. Dark-billed Cuckoos have occurred only rarely north of South America (eBird, AOU 1998), with records from Clipperton Island (13 August 1958), Grenada (26 March 1963), Panama (26 January 1980), Nicaragua (28 April 2017), and an individual recovered from a wildlife rehabilitation clinic in Texas, USA. The latter bird was brought to the clinic on 7 February 1987, later died there, and then was donated to the Louisiana State University Museum of Natural Sciences and prepared as a skin specimen (LSUMZ 164956). The record was accepted by the Texas Bird Records Committee (Lockwood 1998) but was designated as "origin hypothetical" by the ABA-Checklist Committee because of the unclear circumstances of its discovery (Robbins et al. 2003).

On 6 February 2019, Marcello Gomes and Kyle Matera were birding at West Delray Regional Park in Palm Beach County, Florida. At 1701, they spotted a *Coccyzus* cuckoo in the scrubby woods of the park, and were able to get photographs. The bird had an all dark bill, creamy underparts, with white sides of the throat. The bill and throat color seemed to rule out Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americana*), the only common species of *Coccyzus* in the state, which is a common migrant and widespread summer resident but does not typically arrive in Florida until mid-March at the earliest (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). Because of the black bill, they initially suspected that it was a Black-billed Cuckoo (*C. erythropthalmus*), a rare migrant in Florida, although that species typically is not present until April (Stevenson and Anderson 1994). With closer inspection, they noticed the creamy underparts, and then suspected that it may be an aberrant or young Mangrove Cuckoo (*C. minor*). The Mangrove Cuckoo is an uncommon breeding species in mangroves and West Indian hammock forests in extreme south Florida and the Florida Keys; they are quite unusual north of southern Miami-Dade County (Greenlaw et al. 2014). They posted

their photographs on eBird that night (as Mangrove Cuckoo), which set off alerts to eBird subscribers. Over the next 24 hours many birders responded on various websites, and eventually identified it as a Dark-billed Cuckoo.

The observers found the cuckoo again on the morning of 8 February and dozens of other observers saw the cuckoo over the next few days (including AWK on 9 February). It was last seen on 10 February at approximately 0900. The bird was incredibly well documented; 142 lists were submitted to eBird that included this cuckoo, many with photographs.

The large West Delray Regional Park is a multi-use facility, with areas devoted to radio-controlled devices (airplanes, trucks, and helicopters), mountain-biking, archery, disc-golf, picnics, and camping. The western edge of the park is a thick, wet hardwood hammock, continuous with similar forests along the canals that partition the developed eastern areas of Palm Beach County from the stormwater treatment areas of the western part of the county. The park has small ponds bordered by scrub, and large areas of open grassy fields. The park is not often visited by birders; for example, only three checklists for the park were submitted to eBird in January 2019 and only two in December 2018. The wooded and scrubby areas of the park are heavily used by mountain bikers, and single-track trails wind throughout the woods and scrub. The cuckoo was seen only in the scrubby edges bordering the ponds and parking lots, which were dominated by Australian pines (*Casuarina* sp.), willows (*Salix* sp.), and Brazilian pepper (*Schinus terebinthifolia*). Canopy height in the scrub was only 3–5 m, with the *Casurina* topping at about 10 m.

The cuckoo had the typical languid behavior of *Coccyzus* cuckoos, moving slowly through the leafy parts of the shrubs, with long pauses to forage for insect larvae, mostly caterpillars of gulf fritillaries (*Agraulis vanilla*). It occasionally dropped to the leaf litter to forage. Early in the day or after rain showers, it sometimes perched in the open, slightly spreading its wings and fanning its tail as the morning sun hit its underparts. It had quick direct flights, and was easy to lose in the vegetation when it moved more than a few meters. However, it tended to be easy to find again because it kept in the more

Figure 1. Side view of Dark-billed Cuckoo, Palm Beach County, 8 February 2019. Photo by Mark Berney.

open scrub rather than the thicker nearby forests. It seemed largely unperturbed by the throng of birders and the near constant passing of mountain-bikers, some as close as 3–4 m. It never vocalized during our visits.

The following description is based on photographs posted on eBird, and photographs by the authors. This was a small *Coccyzus* cuckoo, about the size of a Northern Mockingbird (*Mimus polyglottos*). The bill was completely flat black and rather small for a *Coccyzus*, compared to Yellow-billed or Mangrove cuckoos (Fig. 1). The bare eyering was complete and dull yellow. The iris was very dark brown. The crown was grayish brown. A somewhat inconspicuous sooty mask extended from the lores to posterior of the eye. The back, rump, scapulars, and wing coverts were warm brown (Fig. 2). The remiges were broadly edged brownish-rufous, giving the bird a rufous wing panel at rest, somewhat similar to Yellow-billed Cuckoo but less distinctive (Fig. 1). The underwing coverts were light creamy peach. The underparts were light creamy peach from the chin to the tips of the undertail coverts but with contrasting bright, pale grayish-white malars (Fig. 1). The outer three pairs of the strongly graduated rectrices were dark gray (moderately worn) to black (fresh, only R4), and broadly tipped white; the inner two pairs were brown and worn (Fig. 3). The toes appeared to be pale olive-gray. Although KM and MG had never

Figure 2. Dorsal view of Dark-billed Cuckoo, Palm Beach County, 8 February 2019. Photo by Mark Berney.

before seen this species, and AWK had only observed the species once prior (in Peru in 1996), the species is distinctive and easily identified.

Based on the more tapered shape and less contrasting black and white pattern of the rectrices (Fig. 3), the Florida bird is a first winter or juvenile if Dark-billed is similar to other species in the genus (Pyle 1997). Similarly, the Texas bird (see above) also shows this pattern typical of a juvenile or first-winter bird. Payne (2005) stated that young birds have a rufous wing panel, which the Florida individual clearly shows (Fig. 2).

A wild origin for this cuckoo's occurrence in Florida is far more likely than an escape from captivity. *Coccyzus* cuckoos are very rarely kept by aviculturists or zoos (Payne 2005). The bird did not show any signs of former captivity, although the one new feather in the tail is not likely part of a normal molt sequence. Broken or lost single feathers

Figure 3. Ventral view of Dark-billed Cuckoo, Palm Beach County, 8 February 2019. Photo by Mark Berney.

are often replaced, and cuckoo feathers in general are more loosely attached than in most other bird orders (AWK, pers. obs). Previous records of Dark-billed Cuckoo far from its normal distribution (Clipperton Island, Grenada, Nicaragua) give this species an established pattern of vagrancy expected in a long-distance migrant. The dates of the Florida bird (7–10 February) are similar to the Panama record (26 January), and the Texas record (7 February), indicating that his species may leave its breeding grounds quite early. The Dark-billed Cuckoo in Palm Beach County was unanimously accepted by the Florida Ornithological Society Records Committee (#2019-1384) and the ABA-Checklist Committee (Pyle et al. 2019).

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