

San Luis Valley Habitat Conservation Plan

2020 Year end updates



Photo credit: Tim Carden of RGWCD

Overview of the HCP

The San Luis Valley Regional Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) is essentially a mitigation program that offsets the impacts of specific activities on the habitat of two Endangered Species Act (ESA) listed birds - the Southwestern willow flycatcher and the Yellow-billed cuckoo. Both birds migrate from Central and South America to breed in the Valley from May-August. They use willow and cottonwood habitat patches along streams and rivers for breeding -an example habitat patch can be seen in the image above.

Because both species are listed under the ESA, impacts that harm them are prohibited without a permit. The HCP provides permits for private landowners, the Counties in the Valley, 4 Municipalities, the Rio Grande Water Conservation District, and the State of Colorado (DWR and CPW), when performing specific agricultural, water, and infrastructure projects (see rgwcd.org/HCP for the full list of covered activities). The HCP works with private landowners and the permittees to maintain mitigation habitat on their lands to offset the impacts, aiding in the conservation of both species. The HCP has been in effect since 2012, allowing these activities to continue.

WHAT'S NEW IN 2020

YELLOW-BILLED CUCKOO UPDATES

USFWS released updated proposed critical habitat and issued a decision on the delisting petition

2020 SURVEY SEASON

Results from the habitat surveys and 2020 Valley-wide flycatcher survey

ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

Introducing this newsletter, a convenient way to provide an annual update on the HCP

2020 Survey Results

Properties in the mitigation program are monitored once every three years to determine the amount of habitat present and quantify the quality of the habitat. The quality is determined using a Habitat Quality Index (HQI), that ranks several habitat components on how suitable they are for both species. The same methods are used on public land reference sites for comparisons with the mitigation properties. The HQI values are remaining strong for all properties (specific values in the annual report). There are currently over 410 acres of habitat enrolled to offset 246 acres of habitat impacts over the 30-year permit term.

For 2020, the HCP worked with public land agencies to survey for the birds to determine the numbers present in the Valley. In total 9 flycatcher territories were located on HCP properties. Overall, flycatchers were present on 5 out of 7 HCP properties. Cuckoos were surveyed for on 4 properties without any detections. The Valley-wide flycatcher territory count was 83, with large numbers detected on the Rio Grande State Wildlife Area, Alamosa National Wildlife Refuge, and the Bureau of Land Management McIntire-Simpson property.



Photo credit: Tim Carden of RGWCD

Yellow-Billed Cuckoo Updates



Photo credit: Creed Clayton of USFWS

The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is responsible for implementing the Endangered Species Act and released two important updates on the yellow-billed cuckoo this year.

Firstly, USFWS released an updated proposed critical habitat - no critical habitat units were suggested for the Valley. The nearest units in Colorado are along the Colorado River by Grand Junction and the Gunnison River near Hotchkiss. The final decision will be published in 2021.

USFWS also determined that the cuckoo still qualifies as a threatened species under the ESA in response to a delisting petition. Therefore, the regulations of the act still apply. For more information on yellow-billed cuckoo updates visit: ecos.fws.gov/ecp/species/3911

Annual Newsletter

This is the first annual HCP newsletter. It is intended to provide updates about the HCP in less technical terms than the annual report. The newsletter will be published annually, so check rgwcd.org/HCP for future issues and more HCP information.