

## **Gila Woodpecker (*Melanerpes uropygialis*)**

NMPIF level: Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 2 (BC2)

NMPIF assessment score: 14

NM stewardship responsibility: Low

National PIF status: No special status

New Mexico BCRs: 34, 35

Primary breeding habitat(s): Southwest Riparian

### **Summary of Concern**

Gila Woodpecker is a Sonoran Desert species with limited distribution in riparian areas of southwest New Mexico. The state population requires maintenance of relatively large patches of mature riparian woodland habitat including snags and large trees for nesting.

### **Associated Species**

Acorn Woodpecker, American Kestrel, Cassin's Kingbird (SC2), Common Black-Hawk (BC1), Elf Owl (SC1), Northern Flicker, Brown-crested Flycatcher, Hooded Oriole (BC2), Ladder-backed Woodpecker, Vermilion Flycatcher, Western Screech-Owl, White-winged Dove

### **Distribution**

Gila Woodpecker occupies western lowland areas of Mexico, from Jalisco and southern Baja California north. Its range in the United States includes much of the southern half of Arizona, with small extensions into southeast California, southern Nevada, and southwest New Mexico.

In New Mexico, this species is found in the lower Gila Valley in Hidalgo and Grant counties, Guadalupe Canyon, San Simon Cienega, drainages of the Animas and Peloncillo Mountains, and Bitter Creek in western Grant County (Edwards and Schnell 2000, Parmeter et al. 2002).

### **Ecology and Habitat Requirements**

Gila Woodpecker is a characteristic species of Sonoran Desert regions of the United States and Mexico. It is often associated with large saguaro cacti, but its range extends farther north, east, and west than that of the saguaro. Where tall cacti are absent, Gila Woodpeckers may occur in lowland areas with tall trees suitable for nesting, including dry subtropical forests in Mexico and riparian woodlands in the United States. In Arizona, the species also uses residential areas. In New Mexico, Gila Woodpeckers are fairly common in cottonwood groves along the Gila River west of Redrock, and in scattered other locations in the southwest part of the state (Edwards and Schnell 2000).

Breeding begins in April and lasts through August, with the height of nesting in May. A second or even third clutch is sometimes raised. Nesting in New Mexico occurs in mature cottonwood- or sycamore-dominated riparian woodland. Nests are excavated in dead or live cottonwood or willow at a range of heights (8-40 feet)(Williams 1999). Groves smaller than 50 ac tend to be avoided (Rosenberg et al. 1991). In some areas, European Starlings compete aggressively with Gila Woodpeckers for excavated cavities, and may limit productivity (Kerpez and Smith 1990, Rosenberg et al. 1991).

**Conservation Status**

**Species Assessment**

DISTRIBUTION	4
THREATS	3
GLOBAL POPULATION SIZE	3
LOCAL POPULATION TREND	3
IMPORTANCE OF NEW MEXICO	1
<b>COMBINED SCORE</b>	<b>14</b>

Gila Woodpecker is a Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 2 species for New Mexico, with a combined vulnerability score of 14. At the continental level, it receives a high PIF vulnerability score of 4 for its relatively small distributional range. Gila Woodpecker is listed as threatened in the state of New Mexico.

**Population Size**

PIF estimates a species population of 3.3 million, and that 25% occurs in the United States. Densities in Arizona can be fairly high: Mills et al. (1989) found Gila Woodpecker densities of 29 birds/km<sup>2</sup> in urban areas with high percentages of native vegetation, 16 birds/km<sup>2</sup> in urban areas with high percentages of

exotic vegetation, 9 birds/km<sup>2</sup> in natural desert areas with native vegetation and no houses. The number of Gila Woodpeckers in New Mexico is unknown but apparently small (i.e., less than 50). A total of 27 were reported along the Animas Creek on the December 2006 Peloncillo Mountains Christmas Bird Count, but considerable double counting of individuals could have occurred (N. Moore-Craig, pers. comm.). Other recent counts include 10 individuals at Double Adobes and 2 on Deer Creek near Granite Gap (N. Moore-Craig, pers. comm.).

### Population Trend

This species is not well-sampled by BBS in New Mexico; a local population trend score of 3 indicates uncertainty regarding state trends. Gila Woodpeckers may have declined in some areas due to tree clearing and nest competition with European Starlings (Edwards and Schnell 2000). BBS data from Arizona suggest the population declined between 1980-2004 (annual trend = -2.3, p = 0.06, n = 30). BBS data for the United States (mostly Arizona) population for 1966-2004 are:

	Annual Trend (%)	P-value	Number of Routes
FWS Region 2	-1.6	0.24	33
Western States	-1.5	0.27	35

### Threats

Across its range Gila Woodpecker is threatened by human development of Sonoran Desert habitat, and by nest site competition with European Starlings (Kerpez and Smith 1990). Loss of saguaro cacti due to development and changing land uses is a principal threat in Arizona. In New Mexico, the species depends on large patches of mature riparian vegetation, and may be threatened by any activities (e.g., severe fires) that reduce or fragment riparian habitat.

### Management Issues and Recommendations

Management for Gila Woodpecker in New Mexico should focus on maintaining healthy riparian areas along the Gila River and elsewhere in the southwest portion of the state.

### NMPIF Recommendations

- Maintain Gila River flows, including periodic overbanking, to ensure regeneration of dominant cottonwood and sycamore vegetation. Avoid river channelization.

- Manage riparian areas to avoid degradation or fragmentation of large woodland patches.

### **Species Conservation Objectives**

#### **NMPIF Objectives**

- Maintain the current number of breeding pairs in Guadalupe Canyon, the Animas Valley, Deer Creek, and San Simon Cienaga.
- Increase population to 2 breeding pairs per mile of stream along the Gila River from the confluence of Mogollon Creek to the Arizona border, bringing population to at least 50 pairs by the year 2020.

#### **Sources of Information**

Edwards, H. H., and G. D. Schnell. 2000. Gila Woodpecker (*Melanerpes uropygialis*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 532 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.

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