



# WILDLIFE NOTES

## Gila woodpecker

### *Melanerpes uropygialis*

The Gila Woodpecker is an aggressive and striking bird. It may be distinguished from other woodpeckers by a combination of barred black-and-white upper parts, white patches on the rump and at the bases of the primary feathers, and a light grayish-brown head. The loud "ank-ank-ank" and other calls of this bird are easily recognized once learned.

### Descriptive Details

Both sexes have barred black-and-white wings, and the tail is black with barring in the center. It has a brownish orange iris, a black bill and green legs. The wings measure up to 5 1/2 inches, and the tail measures about four inches in length.

### Distribution

This woodpecker is found from southeastern California, central Arizona, and southwestern New Mexico, southward through western Mexico to the states of Jalisco and Aguascalientes. In New Mexico, this woodpecker is a resident in the Gila Valley (northeast to Mogollon Creek in Grant County) and in Guadalupe Canyon (Hidalgo County), which are key habitat areas for it in the state. Vagrants have been reported near Glenwood (Catron County), at Silver City, and in Hidalgo County (Animas Creek and Cloverdale).

### Biology

The Gila woodpecker is found in a wide variety of lowland and middle elevation habitats which consists of saguaro cacti to open forest. In New Mexico, however, it is found in lower woodlands, especially cottonwoods, and along stream courses. It feeds on insects and fruits, and at times it catches flies. The nest is a hole excavated in a tree, typically in a cottonwood limb fairly high above the ground. They generally lay three to five white eggs with the size averaging one inch in length.

### Status

The Gila woodpecker is common over much of its range, including parts of Arizona. This bird was not recorded in New Mexico until the beginning of the 20th century, which has led to speculation that it may be a recent invader. If that's true, this woodpecker reached its present range in the Gila Valley by the early 1900s and was considered common at Red Rock in September 1908. Since then, the species has declined in numbers in that area, and also along the Gila Valley around Cliff. At present, this bird is thought of as uncommon to fairly common, except that it is rare outside of these areas in New Mexico. Habitat destruction, particularly in the form of clearing of cottonwoods, is a major threat to the species. In



addition, breeding European starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) compete with this species for nest holes, and such interference could negatively affect this woodpecker.

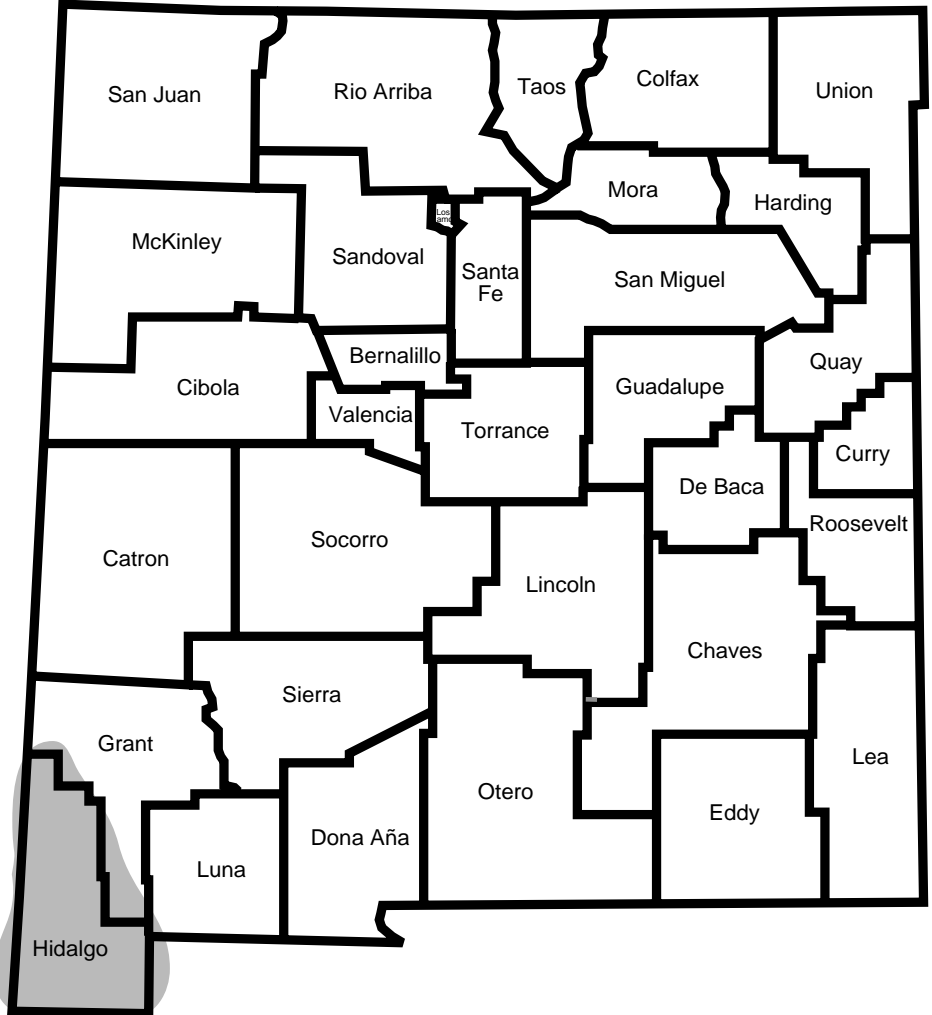
### Conservation

The preservation and restoration of woodlands are essential for the survival of this woodpecker in New Mexico.

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