

Cowbirds

By Susan Heath

Along the Texas coast you might think of Cattle Egrets as “cow birds” but there is actually a group of birds known as cowbirds that aren’t herons at all. If you’ve seen one you probably called it a blackbird, as that’s what they look like. Here along the Texas coast we have two cowbirds, the Brown-headed Cowbird and the Bronzed Cowbird. They are both Red-winged Blackbird size but lack the red and yellow in the wings.



Cowbird and young Cardinal by Susan Heath

Brown-headed Cowbirds get their name from the male’s brown head. The body is black. Male Bronzed Cowbirds are glossy black all over. Females of both species are dull brown. The distinguishing characteristic of the Bronzed Cowbird is that they have a red eye which really stands out against their black plumage.

Males also have a thick group of feathers on the back of their neck known as a ruff which they display to females during breeding. They also do a really fantastic hovering flight a few feet off the ground in front of the female. It is impressive, I have to admit. Brown-headed Cowbirds don’t have such an exciting breeding display, unfortunately.

What makes cowbirds famous is not any of the above, though. They are best known for being brood parasites. What’s that? Well, here’s how it goes. A female cowbird watches as the female of another species of bird lays its eggs. When that other female leaves the nest for whatever reason, the female cowbird sneaks in and lays her own egg in the nest.

The instinct to incubate and feed the young is so strong that the parasitized species will incubate the cowbird egg and feed the cowbird baby along with their own. Cowbirds often pick species to parasitize that are slightly smaller than themselves so their offspring will have a competitive advantage over the parasitized species’ chicks and cowbird chicks have even been documented pushing the parasitized species’ young out of the nest.

This behavior by cowbirds is responsible for the decline of many other species including two endangered songbirds in Texas, the Golden-cheeked Warbler and the Black-capped Vireo. The Kirtland’s Warbler that breeds in Michigan has also been particularly hard hit. Many other species of songbirds are affected as well and as a result there are cowbird control programs in many states to help stem this threat.

The problem in the U.S. comes mostly from Brown-headed Cowbirds, as their range extends across the entire U.S. and into Canada. Bronzed Cowbirds are restricted to the southern parts of Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California in the U.S. but they are widespread in Central America.

I recently witnessed a male Northern Cardinal feeding a young Bronzed Cowbird on the platform feeder in our backyard. I knew the young bird wasn't a cardinal but I wasn't sure what it was because it lacked the red eye of the Bronzed Cowbird. I did a little research and discovered that the young birds don't have the red eye.

I've seen Brown-headed Cowbird babies being fed by a number of species but never a Bronzed Cowbird baby. It was interesting from that standpoint and there are plenty of cardinals so I wasn't too worried about that. But overall cowbirds are a problem for many species of birds.

Photo caption: A Northern Cardinal feeding a young Bronzed Cowbird.