

Protected Status of Parasitic Brown Headed Cowbirds

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The Problem:

Brown Headed Cowbirds currently remain protected under federal laws governing songbirds. Unfortunately songbird nest parasitism caused by cowbirds is believed a major factor in declining migratory songbird populations in much of the United States. Brown headed cowbirds, sometimes referred to as the "buffalo bird," are believed to have evolved aside vast herds of American bison by taking advantage of insects stirred by the grazing animals. Being unable to build or care for nests while moving with wandering herds, cowbirds learned to deposit their eggs in nests of other birds. Cowbird chicks hatch earlier and are larger than most songbirds. Cowbird nest mates usually perish as they are out-competed for food delivered by overstressed parent birds. A single female cowbird will typically parasitize several songbird nests as they distribute multiple eggs. Cowbirds are known to have parasitized species from hummingbirds to wood ducks, but native sparrows and warblers serve as the most typical host.

Cowbirds thrive amongst edge habitats with open areas which have greatly increased due to post European settlement land use practices. Cowbirds do not need bison or cattle populations to thrive. One cowbird study in Texas showed a 90% nesting failure of other native songbirds due to cowbird parasitism. But six years after a cowbird trapping effort began the nest parasitism dropped to 10%.

In some states natural resources departments have provided leadership to promote cowbird control by interested land owners and conservation groups. In Texas as example, USFWS cowbird trapping permits are handled by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and issued only after interested individuals/groups complete training conducted by the TPWD. Training covers methods of cowbird trapping and timing, trap building plans, correct identification, release of non-target species, and required record keeping. Under a similar program lead by the WDNR, cowbird trapping could benefit native songbird populations and further involve interested citizens in benefiting wildlife. In some cases federal NRCS funding has been available for the building of cowbird traps. The traps are large and expensive.

Wisconsin songbird enthusiasts lack information on cowbird control benefits and possibilities.

Would you support a collaborative effort with the USFWS and NRCS but lead by the WDNR, to assist interested individuals and conservation groups with efforts to control parasitic cowbirds, through provided information and training?

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