



Male

Brown-headed Cowbird

Coloring instructions:

Brown - the entire head except for the bill and the eye

Black - everything else

Brown-headed Cowbird

Length: 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Habitat: Common resident in fields and farmlands.

Field marks: Male has brown head and black body. Female is grayish-brown overall and hard to identify.

Field notes: These birds tend to feed in mixed flocks with Red-winged and other blackbirds in the nonbreeding season.

Cowbirds practice **brood parasitism**. They do not sit on their eggs or feed their hatchlings like most other birds do. Cowbirds let other birds do all that work for them. A female cowbird will lay an egg in the nest of another species when the parents are away. Sometimes she will push out one of the eggs already in the nest! She then flies away and never returns.

Usually, the cowbird egg hatches earlier than the other eggs. Usually, the baby cowbird is larger than the true babies of its foster parents. Bird parents tend to give the most food they bring to the nest to the baby with the biggest mouth. As a result, the foster parents feed the larger cowbird baby more than they feed their own children. Sometimes the larger cowbird baby will even push some of its smaller nest mates out of the nest.

This has led to a fascinating struggle between cowbirds and possible foster parents. Many species have learned to recognize a cowbird egg and will throw it out of the nest or will start a new nest. Robins, who lay blue eggs, will eject a cowbird egg. And not all species make good foster parents. Based on what you already know, why would laying an egg in the nest of a hawk, a duck, a hummingbird or a killdeer be a mistake?

Because of many dangers, only 3% of cowbird eggs survive to become adults. However, cowbirds don't have to spend any time building nests, incubating eggs, and feeding babies. Female cowbirds can, like the chicken, keep laying eggs over many weeks. A female cowbird lays about 40 eggs per year, far more than other species.

The Brown-headed Cowbird prefers a mix of trees and open land. Before the arrival of Europeans in North America, cowbirds were restricted to the edge where the Great Plains met the vast forests of the east. The colonists, however, began clearing the eastern forests for towns and farms. This created woodland edges, the cowbird's preferred habitat, throughout the forest.

As pioneers moved west across the treeless prairies, they planted trees in their towns, allowing the cowbirds to move across the Great Plains and into the West. Cowbirds are now found all over the United States. Within the last century, many bird species which never experience nest parasitism by cowbirds suddenly came under great pressure. Many eastern forest birds have declined drastically as a result.

Brown-headed Cowbird Challenges

Put a check mark in the box when you have completed the challenge.

- Identify a male cowbird, which is black with a brown head.
- Identify a female cowbird, which is all grayish brown.
- See evidence of brood parasitism: the cowbird female quietly watching the activities of other nest-building birds; an egg in a nest that looks different from the others; parents feeding a baby bird that looks bigger than all the rest.
- In winter, see cowbirds within a mixed flock of blackbirds and starlings.

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