

## **“The Cowbird” by Sally Cureton**

### **Birds sometimes need help.**

With their breeding season starting, many are struggling to maintain their populations. Right now more than 200 species need immediate help. Among those most affected are many of the birds that we are used to seeing and hearing, such as chickadees. Their population numbers have declined by 73 percent since 1973. Putting up a birdhouse or two in your yard is one easy way to really make a difference. Just be sure to place it high enough in the tree with the opening facing to the south, so the sun can get in to warm the eggs and then the babies.

### **A unique bird.**

The Brown-headed Cowbird is a small blackbird that is really one of a kind. The males are black with a distinctive brown head. Females are a dull grey-brown. Originally they were followers of the bison herds on the Great Plains. As forests were cleared in the 1800's, these birds spread east and west. With the introduction of cattle, they became associated with those herds. Generally Cowbirds feed on the ground on seeds and insects that are stirred up as the cattle move around.

However what makes this bird really different is the fact that it is the only parasitic bird in North America. The female does not construct a nest of her own, but deposits her eggs in the nests of other birds that then raise the young cowbirds. They are not at all territorial. Small flocks of males will stay in a given area while the females travel around looking for suitable nests in which they will lay their eggs. The female cowbird actually has to devote a significant amount of her time to locating these nests. She will lay her egg early in the morning when the host bird is not near the nest. Usually this is done after the host bird has started laying their own eggs, although sometimes they will lay their egg first in the nest.

Other birds have developed various responses to the Cowbird eggs. Some, such as Robins and Catbirds, recognize the strange egg, will puncture it and remove it. Other species, such as the Yellow Warbler and Phoebe, will desert their nest, or build another nest on top of the one with the Cowbird egg in it. Yet, others will accept the new egg, incubate it, and raise it as their own. Studies have shown that Cowbirds have parasitized the nests of over 220 species. Cowbird chicks have been raised by over 150 various species - the majority of those being songbirds. Most females will specialize in one particular host species.

A typical female cowbird will lay approximately 40 eggs in a season. Of this number only about 2 or 3 will actually hatch and mature. Despite this, surveys conducted since 1966 have show that Cowbird numbers are

actually declining by about 1% per year. Contrary to common perceptions, the host bird's reproductive success suffers very little over the breeding season.

Cowbirds migrate to Mexico and Central America in the fall, generally in large groups with Red-winged Blackbirds, Rusty Blackbirds and Common Grackles. Spring migration begins in March and the birds will reach their breeding grounds in April. Very social birds, they will spend their nights in communal roosts. A unique bird both in appearance and behavior.