

along in Ontario. It vividly presents aspects of the earlier history of birding in this province, while

thoroughly introducing one of Ontario ornithology's most important mentors.

Ron Tozer, R.R. 1, Dwight, Ontario P0A 1H0

## Photo Quiz

by  
Doug McRae

Answer to Photo Quiz in *Ontario Birds* 10 (3): **Brown-headed Cowbird.**

This quiz bird, a juvenile Brown-headed Cowbird, was perhaps a bit unfair. On the colour print we used, kindly submitted by avid *Ontario Birds* reader Molly Sorlie of Barrie, it is much easier to tell the species, however it becomes more difficult when converted to black-and-white. Also, it would have been a snap if we had used the other shot that Molly sent — the one showing a Song Sparrow shovelling food into this fledgling! While adult cowbirds usually don't present an identification problem, many birders seeing their first juveniles, like this one, can be quite confused.

To start with, we can establish that this bird is a juvenile by several features. The most obvious indicator of age is the bill. The soft, protruding gape edge — diagnostic of young birds — is quite visible on this photo. Another feature that suggests a young bird is the "texture" of the feathers. If you look carefully you will notice

that the feathers have a dull, flat, almost fuzzy look to them, unlike the glossy finish that most adult birds show. This is particularly noticeable on the feathers of the crown and flanks. A final feature that suggests this bird is a young bird is the stubby-looking tail.

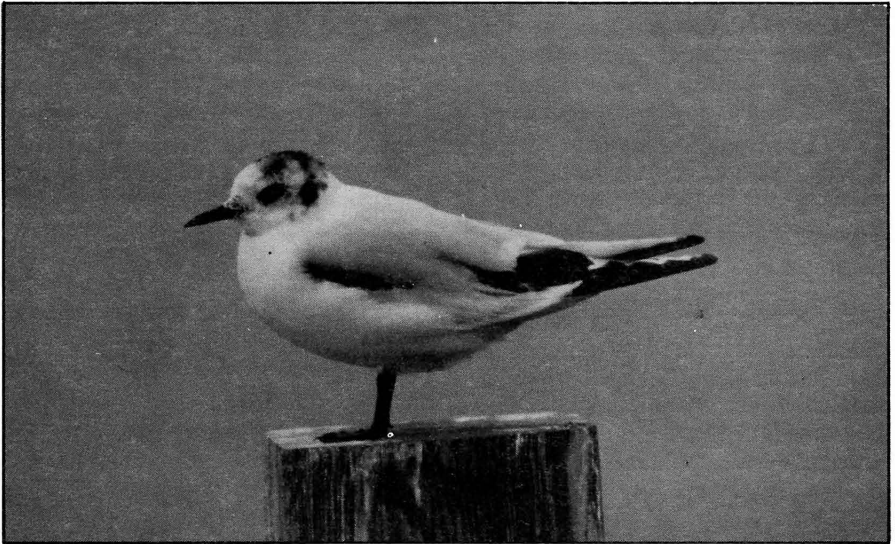
In all honesty I don't know if you can distinguish this bird as a Brown-headed Cowbird, based on a black-and-white photograph, but there are several features that are helpful. The most obvious feature visible is the light scaling on the outer edges of most coverts and contour feathers. This pattern, which would be even more pronounced in a bird another week or two older, usually comes as a shock to observers unfamiliar with this age class as it is totally unlike any adult plumage. In fact, most observers seeing their first cowbird of this age are unable to come up with an identification until the adult of the host species shows up, providing a substantial clue!

Structurally speaking, especially because of the bill, this bird most

resembles a finch, grosbeak or sparrow. However, if you look carefully, the breast of this bird appears mostly dark with light edgings. This pattern is quite unlike most sparrows or finches which usually have streaked breasts. Also, most finches and sparrows at this age show distinct wingbars, lacking on

this individual. This plumage feature, combined with the bill shape and the pale feather edgings certainly help to identify this bird as a Brown-headed Cowbird.

Avoid gullibility when considering the identity of our next quiz bird!



Doug McRae, Box 130, St. Williams, Ontario N0E 1P0