

COWBIRDS: More experiences with repeats and returns

by Mabel Warburton

Experiences with Banded Cowbirds (Gillespie: EBBA NEWS 36(4)) sent me to my files to try to answer the question "have other banders noticed similar itineraries of cowbirds?"

Similar to her experience, I found that in my first ten years of banding (1955-1965) cowbirds were indeed spring birds evidently returning to their mating grounds. Of the 154 cowbirds banded during those years, all were captured in April, May, June, July and August, except six, one of these banded in February, two in November and three in December.

My banding station at this time was about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from the Delaware River at Morrisville, Penna. I banded fairly consistently using both traps and nets. There were no repeats and no returns from the six winter-banded cowbirds, but of the spring-summer banded birds, there were sixty-nine repeats.

In 1965 I had my first winter "flight" of 18 cowbirds in January, followed by only 3 in February and 1 in March. Of these I had one repeat, the January female appearing again April 14 after an absence of 88 days. During these same ten years, returns (all of the spring-summer birds) were more plentiful. Of the same 154 birds, there were 14 returns (representing 11 birds as 3 returned twice). I have never caught a cowbird banded by any other bander.

Like Mrs. Gillespie, I had a female cowbird constantly in the traps. She was transplanted to Philadelphia twice, with no malice, we merely wanted to show her at a bird-banding demonstration in Pennypack Park, and both times she returned and was back in a trap on my grounds within a few days. She rode to Philadelphia in a covered collecting box, and was released after showing in what should have been totally foreign ground to her. The flight back would be approximately 25 miles.

With the close of my Morrisville bird banding station, it was not until 1974 that I finally settled down to a desirable banding area where I might catch winter cowbirds. My small backyard is now about one block back from the Delaware River. During the winter of 1974 in January, February and March I banded 243 cowbirds with but one repeat. This was an AHY Male with a glazed, presumably blind eye which might account for his seeking food in the easiest place, the trap. My traps and feeders are all located in plain view from a picture window and I also have not observed a banded cowbird.

This winter our area seems to have had an unusual number of what the newspapers term "flocks of blackbirds". I have noticed in the mornings that many of the cowbirds are speckled with white droppings showing they spent the night in a communal roost.

It would seem that my experiences with winter cowbirds were very similar to Mrs. Gillespie's, and that winter cowbirds in this area (401-0745) are roving flocks seeking food, presumably in different localities each day. (15 S. Bell Avenue, Yardley, Pa. 19067)