

Bronzed Cowbird - First Mississippi Records

Malcolm Hodges and Judith Toups

9 Arbor Circle, Ocean Springs, Ms. and 4 Hartford Place, Gulfport, Ms.

On 6 January 1979, Malcolm Hodges, Judith Toups, Bob Chapel, of Urbana, Illinois, and Jim Chapel, of Pascagoula, Ms., were birding the area known as the Pascagoula River Marsh, specifically, on Port Road at the junction of the L&N Railroad tracks. Upon noting a very large gathering of "Icterid" species, we began a deliberate search for Bronzed Cowbirds (Tangavius aeneus), a species which we felt was "overdue" in this state.

The utility wires and the ground around the railroad tracks were well populated with several readily identifiable species of blackbirds, namely Boat-tailed Grackles (Quiscalus major), Red-winged Blackbirds (Agelaius phoeniceus), and Brown-headed Cowbirds (Molothrus ater) in addition to large flocks of Starlings (Sturnus vulgaris). MH located the first Bronzed Cowbird in only a short time (approximately 30 seconds from the time he began to look for the species). MH tentatively identified the bird on the wire as a Bronzed Cowbird on the basis of its aggressive behavior and a "different" hunch-shouldered appearance... It was small, about the size of a Red-winged Blackbird, (direct size comparison); it was totally black and showed little iridescence. The bird seemed hunched and continually raised and lowered a ruff which covered the nape, upper mantle, and both sides of the neck. Its head was held at shoulder level and looked huge when the bird faced forward (due to the ruffing out of the neck feathers).

The bill was dark and slightly longer and somewhat thinner than those of the Brown-headed Cowbirds nearby, but shorter and more conical than the bill of a Red-winged Blackbird. Later observations seem to indicate that the bill, though dark, can take on a lighter, or "Mother of pearl" quality, in certain lights. The bird had a dark eye. The wings showed no marks, the tail was short and squared. Observation of this first Bronzed Cowbird was made by all four observers at a distance of approximately 175 feet as the bird perched on an overhead utility wire. The sky was overcast and the light was only fair. MH used a spotting scope set at 30X, Toups used a spotting scope set at 20X and Bob Chapel used a scope at 25X. We kept the bird under observation for 2 or 3 minutes until it flew off, none of us had definitely seen the red eye which is said to be the conclusive field mark.

In short succession, Bob Chapel located another Bronzed Cowbird in a group of Red-winged Blackbirds and Brown-headed Cowbirds as they foraged on the ground. Here again, direct size comparisons were made by Toups and Bob and Jim Chapel. This bird was seen to hold a pebble in its mouth, and was noted to be aggressive. Viewing distance for this second

bird was more like 100 feet ... still we did not see the red-eyes and could only see that they were dark, ruling out the Rusty (Euphagus carolinus) or Brewer's (E. cyanocephalus) blackbirds.

The third, and last Bronzed Cowbird was located on the crossbar of a utility pole. He appeared hunched and had the same general characteristics of the first bird. However this bird did show iridescence, the back was shiny, the head bronzy, and the wings appeared to have a greenish sheen. All four observers saw this bird at a distance of 250 feet through scopes, again the red-eye was not visible.

At that time, sure of our identification but disappointed over our group failure to see the red eyes, we wrote our field notes, without referral to a field guide. Hodges and Bob and Jim Chapel left Mississippi later that day and had no further opportunity to find or study the birds.

On the morning of January 7, Toups and Larry Gates found a large group of blackbirds and Starlings about 1000 feet south of the previous day's sighting. They were feeding in an area of spilled grain near the railroad tracks. It took two hours before the first Bronzed Cowbird was located. Using the car for a blind, we approached the birds within 35 feet and located the Bronzed Cowbird, by shape and an aggressive attitude towards the birds close to it. On this occasion we got a brief glimpse of red eyes before the whole flock, which was very skittish, flew off and we lost our bird. About half an hour later and back at the site of the original observations, we found two birds which were easily distinguishable from other blackbird species as they perched on a utility wire. Both birds were preening and while doing so, the greenish iridescence of their all black plumage was seen. Their posture was hunched, and the top of the head appeared broad and flat. Both Toups and Gates remarked upon the posture of Bronzed Cowbird and its resemblance to the posture of Groove-billed Anis (Crotophaga sulcirostris). While preening, both birds erected a ruff of feathers which extended around to the throat area. At that time, to our immense relief, both birds looked down at us from a distance of less than 40 feet, and red eyes were seen. While still overcast, the light was better than on 6 January.

On 9 January, Pete Donaldson of Biloxi added his field notes, having seen conclusive field marks, including the red eyes ... and on 13 January, three other observers, Tom Imhof, Joe Imhof, and Wayne Weber joined Toups and Gates in the area where we located at least fifteen Bronzed Cowbirds, one of which was viewed in a bush at eye level from 30 feet, showing a fine ruff and red eyes. At that time the opinion was voiced that probably many more Bronzed Cowbirds were present in the area.

Bronzed Cowbirds have been seen in the area on six occasions, the last two sightings being of a single bird by a single observer, Toups,

the latest on 25 February 1979. Bronzed Cowbirds are regarded as a western species, and until the early 1970's their easternmost occurrence was in Cameron Parish, Louisiana. By 1975 they occurred in the New Orleans area where they have been recorded since (Imhof, Am. Birds, 32: 1020, 1978).

The occurrence of the Bronzed Cowbird in Jackson County, Ms. is not, however, the easternmost record for this species. Up to five birds were seen in three Florida locations in December 1977 and in January 1978 (Stevenson, Am. Birds, 32:342, 1978).

We noted on several occasions that Bronzed Cowbirds appear to be somewhat aggressive towards other species. They seem to like some distance between themselves and other birds, even when resting on wires. Bob Chapel in his notes, says "dominated Red-winged Blackbirds."

Hodges in field notes remarks ... "The bird's actions were quite peculiar. He continually ruffed out his neck feathers and held his head down. His wings were held down at an angle, away from the body. Wings were occasionally fluttered in the manner of a young bird begging for food. The bird strutted and hopped on the wire with its legs outstretched; he acted very excited and almost flew off twice, coming back to the wire each time. He flew up to a wire a foot above, shoving a Red-wing off, and hovered over the wire for a few seconds before landing."

The authors wish to thank Bob and Jim Chapel, Larry Gates, Wayne Weber, Pete Donaldson, Joe Imhof, and Tom Imhof for their assistance in verifying this record.