

PREFACE

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In August 1996, the Research Working Group of Partners In Flight, Ben Wigley and Peter Vickery, chairs, decided to sponsor a series of conferences across the U. S. that would focus discussion on topics of particular importance in bird conservation and identify high priority research needs. Using all available communication and funding mechanisms, Partners In Flight working groups would then assist in seeing that the needed research actually was carried out. Each of the four Partners In Flight regional working groups was asked to identify a high priority topic and the Western Working Group chose Brown-headed Cowbird parasitism.

Cowbirds were selected because research on their ecology and impacts on host species has been conducted primarily in landscapes and vegetation communities from the Great Plains east. As a result, there is a reasonable understanding of cowbird ecology in those regions and of management actions that will help conserve host species.

However, in the expansive landscapes of the West, where many vegetation communities are naturally fragmented and cattle grazing is nearly ubiquitous, relatively little research has been conducted. Most of the West is public land—over 175 million ha are managed by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management and the U.S. Forest Service. About two-thirds of this land is grazed, suggesting that cowbirds may have ready access to hosts across this broad region.

Evidence that the relationship between livestock and cowbird parasitism is poorly researched comes from the array of papers presented at an earlier conference, the North American Research Workshop on the Ecology and Management of Cowbirds, held 4–5 November 1993 in Austin, Texas. Of the 57 papers presented at that conference, only a single paper addressed the relationship between cowbirds and cattle.

This is unfortunate because little is known

about what impacts cowbirds are having on western host species. It seems reasonable to assume that the productivity of some hosts is being reduced, perhaps significantly so. Certainly some western species have declining population trends for which currently there are no explanations.

Resource managers in the West have yet to be provided with information on most aspects of cowbird ecology. These include: (1) the temporal and spatial relationships between cowbirds and livestock; (2) cowbird densities in different geographic areas and vegetation types; (3) factors attracting cowbirds to a given area; (4) cowbird movements and lengths of stay; (5) distances cowbirds are traveling to obtain hosts; (6) impacts on host productivity; (7) host reaction to the presence of cowbirds and cowbird eggs; and (8) how all of the previous factors are affected by topography and landscape characteristics.

If cowbirds are found to impact populations of high priority bird species, management options are available. The dates on which cattle are allowed into a given area and the dates on which they are removed are both flexible. The amount of time they remain and their numbers can be adjusted. Features that attract livestock and cause concentrations that might attract cowbirds, such as water, salt, and shade, can be managed. Because birds nest over a relatively short time period, it is easy to imagine how grazing regimes can be changed to reduce or even eliminate cowbird impacts.

The conference upon which these proceedings are based had at least six presentations on this topic, suggesting an increasing attention to cowbird ecology in western landscapes. I hope that this volume will help stimulate further interest and assure the reader that Partners In Flight, through the Research Working Group and the Western Working Group in particular, will be eager to help support research on this most interesting and important topic.