

The Shiny Cowbird reaches the United States

Will the scourge of the Caribbean impact Florida's avifauna too?

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ON JUNE 14, 1985, WHILE CONDUCTING a Breeding Bird Survey on Lower Matecumbe Key, Monroe County, Florida, Sprunt and Karen Sunderland discovered the first Shiny Cowbird (*Molothrus bonariensis*) reported in the United States, a male, with Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) in mangroves near the shoulder of the Overseas Highway (U.S. 1). Its appearance in Florida was hardly unexpected. From its South American base, the Shiny Cowbird has spread northward, mostly during this century, through the Antilles; its expansion has been particularly strong over the last 30 years (Post and Wiley 1977; Arendt and Vargas 1984). By 1982, the species had reached the north coast of Cuba (Bond 1984; Cruz *et al.* 1985), only about 100 miles south of its point of discovery in the United States. After it was relocated at a nearby feeder, the Lower Matecumbe Shiny Cowbird was observed by birders for several weeks.

In 1986, Smith and his wife were trying to capture Eurasian Collared-Doves (*Streptopelia decaocto*) at nearby Islamorada as part of a field project when, on July 5, three male Shiny Cowbirds landed beside their dove trap. Too surprised to focus properly, Smith captured the birds quickly on film (Fig. 1). One or more of these birds was seen subsequently in the vicinity by other observers, but apparently no better documentation of this species at Islamorada in 1986 was obtained.

On May 25, 1987, Smith and his wife followed up rumors of a Shiny Cowbird in Everglades National Park to find a male and female associating with several Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) on the lawn in front of the Flamingo Visitors' Center. The visitors' observation log showed that a Shiny Cowbird had been reported there to a park ranger on May 5, by an unidentified observer. These birds were easily photographed (Figs. 2–5), proving beyond doubt the presence of this species



Figure 1. Three male Shiny Cowbirds join Mourning Doves and Eurasian Collared-Doves at Islamorada, Florida, July 5, 1986. Photo/P. William Smith (VIREO S14/2/003).

in the United States. This constituted the first record for the Florida peninsula and the first definite report of a female in the United States. Up to five male and two female Shinies were seen together with the Brown-headed Cowbirds at Flamingo until at least late June 1987. A juvenile Shiny was present from June 27 until late July, suggesting the possibility that breeding in Florida has already begun.

Identifying adult male Shiny Cowbirds is easy. They are similar in size to Brown-headed Cowbirds but have a sleeker look, caused by a thinner profile, longer tail, flatter head, and a longer, less conical bill (Figs. 2–4). The head, breast, and upper back are entirely glossy purple, becoming duller on the lower back, wings and tail, and fading on the belly (Figs. 2–3). The brownish eyes do not stand out against the face (Fig. 2).

All other glossy purple species of blackbirds, such as grackles (*Quiscalus* sp.), are larger. Most similar species, like the greener and less iridescent Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*), also have light eyes. The Bronzed Cowbird (*Molothrus aeneus*), which has been seen in south Florida in winter, is larger, has an obvious red eye and ruffled neck, and shows bronzy rather than purple body iridescence.

On the other hand, female and juvenile Shiny Cowbirds represent a definite identification challenge (Figs. 5–6). An examination of specimens at the Academy of Natural Sciences, in Philadelphia, reveals that except for head and bill shape, there is almost complete overlap in characters between female Shinies of the race *minimus*, the one



Figure 2. Male Shiny Cowbird with a Brown-headed Cowbird at Flamingo, Florida, May 25, 1987. Note Shiny's purple body gloss and longer, thinner bill. Photo/P. William Smith (VIREO S14/3/001).



Figure 3. Note Shiny Cowbird's color, size, shape, and tail length compared to Brown-headed Cowbird. Flamingo, Florida, May 25, 1987. Photo/P. William Smith (VIREO S14/3/002).



Figure 4. Female Shiny Cowbird has similar bill shape to male's. Flamingo, Florida, May 25 1987. Photo/P. William Smith (VIREO S14/3/003).

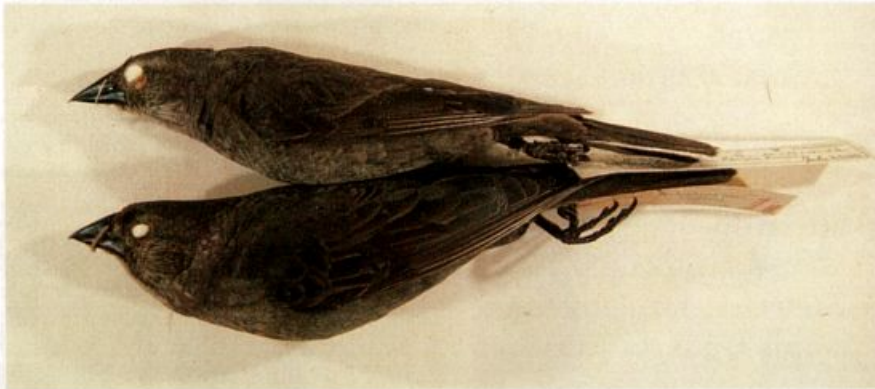


Figure 6. Female Shiny Cowbird (above) may be virtually identical to female Brown-headed except for head and bill shape. Specimens courtesy of the Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA. Photo/P. William Smith.

spreading north to the United States, and correspondingly aged Brown-headed Cowbirds (Fig. 6). The female-type Shiny appears a bit darker and shows a somewhat more prominent eye-stripe than the female-type Brown-headed (Fig. 5), but the reliability of these differences has not yet been tested

in the field—to our knowledge, the two species have never before occurred together. It follows that until more experience is gained, female-type cowbirds in south Florida should be identified with great care and usually referred to as cowbird, sp.

Biologists studying the impact of the

spreading Shiny Cowbird's brood parasitism on Caribbean species such as the Yellow-shouldered Blackbird (*Agelaius xanthomus*) have expressed concern for the region's unadapted avifauna (Post and Wiley 1976; Cruz *et al.* 1985). The Shiny Cowbird's arrival in south Florida may well pose similar problems for some local species (Paul 1985). However, Brown-headed Cowbirds, equally new to south Florida during the breeding season, probably pose at least as great a threat. Thus, it seems inappropriate



Figure 5. Note female Shiny's flatter head, longer, thinner bill, more prominent eye stripe, and slightly darker coloration compared to female Brown-headed Cowbird. Flamingo, Florida, May 25, 1987. Photo/P. William Smith (VIREO S14/3/004).

to single out the Shiny Cowbird as an undesirable addition to the region's birdlife.

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