

# SHINY COWBIRD REACHES OKLAHOMA

by Joseph A. Grzybowski and  
Victor W. Fazio, III

THE SHINY COWBIRD (*MOLOTHRUS bonariensis*) is native to much of the tropical and subtropical zones in South America east of the Andes, and west to eastern Panama (Friedmann 1929). However, in this century, the species has been expanding its range northward and westward.

Post and Wiley (1977a) and Cruz *et al.* (1985) tracked the cowbird's expansion through the Caribbean region. This expansion is discontinuous and may have been aided through introductions by man (Post and Wiley 1977a). Beginning at the southern edge of the Lesser Antilles at the turn of the century, the Shiny Cowbird has progressed slowly for some time, even though one had been collected as early as 1860 on Vieques Island, only ten kilometers west of Puerto Rico (Newton 1860). The first report for Puerto Rico was of 150-175 birds in 1955 (Grayce 1957), and indicated that the Shiny Cowbird was probably already well established. It increased rapidly, and was significantly affecting reproductive success of species such as the Yellow-shouldered Blackbird (*Agelaius xanthomus*) by the 1970s (Post and Wiley 1977b). It spread relatively quickly through the Dominican Republic (Arendt and Vargas



Shiny Cowbird captured June 12, 1990 in the Wichita Mountains N.W.R., Oklahoma. Note black mask and tail barring. Photograph/J. A. Grzybowski.



Shiny Cowbird showing brown flecking on breast and flanks. Photograph/J. A. Grzybowski.



Underwing of Shiny Cowbird showing contrasting row of underwing coverts. Photograph/V. Fazio III.



Brown-headed and Shiny cowbirds for comparison. June 12, 1990. Wichita Mountains, Comanche County, Oklahoma. Photograph/J.A. Grzybowski.

1984) and reached the Florida Keys by 1985 (Smith and Sprunt 1987).

The first recorded occurrence for mainland Florida was from the Everglades in 1987. Females and juveniles were already noted (Smith and Sprunt 1987). During 1988, it was observed north in Florida to Fort DeSoto (Langridge 1988) and Jacksonville (Paul 1988). By 1989, it was clear that numbers of Shiny Cowbirds were increasing substantially in southern Florida (Langridge 1989). At least one had moved out into the Florida Panhandle near Cape San Blas (Imhof 1989).

However, an explosion in distribution was also occurring. First records for four states were noted in 1989. LeGrand (1989) reported several observations in coastal Georgia during May 1989. Another two males made it to Port Fourchon, Louisiana and west in that state to Cameron Parish (Imhof 1989). By July, two males were reported from South Carolina (LeGrand 1990a) with more males and a female appearing in August (LeGrand 1990b). In November 1989, a male appeared in North Carolina (LeGrand 1990b). All records for the United States to this time, however, have been from coastal localities.

On June 12, 1990, David Ely, a field technician, discovered an unfamiliar small blackbird, with glossy blue on the head, in a trap designed for removing Brown-headed Cowbirds (*M. ater*) from Black-capped Vireo (*Vireo atricapillus*) nesting areas. The trap was near Winborn Spring in the Wichita Mountains National Wildlife Refuge, Comanche County, Oklahoma. Fazio returned to the trap the following day, removed the bird, and placed it in a small canary cage with a male Brown-headed Cowbird.

Grzybowski confirmed the bird's identification as a Shiny Cowbird. The bird was photographed, audio-taped, and videotaped on June 15, 1990, and then collected. This con-

stitutes the first record of Shiny Cowbird for Oklahoma. At longitude 98°38'W and latitude 34°44'N, it represents the westernmost record to that date for the hemisphere. It is only the second record for the United States away from coastal areas. The first was also captured in a cowbird trap at the Fort Hood Military Reservation, Texas, on May 23, 1990 (Lasley and Sexton 1990).

The specimen collected in Oklahoma appears to be a first-year male

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(*i.e.*, male in its first potential breeding season) and shows a series of contrasting grayish brown (rather than blackish) and tattered underwing coverts, characteristic of several species of first-year blackbirds (Baird 1958, Selander and Giller 1960, Pyle *et al.* 1987). There is substantial pale flecking on the vent, and lesser amounts on the breast and flanks, also a sign of first-year status (Friedmann 1929). In addition, the primaries show a gradation from glossy greenish black to brownish towards the tips. Some black barring can be seen on the otherwise slightly paler or glossy blue tail feathers.

The iris was brown in life; the tarsus and feet are black. The wing chord and tail measurements were 95 and 67 millimeters, respectively, and identify the subspecies as *M. b. minimus* (Friedmann 1929), recog-

nized as the race spreading through the Caribbean (Post and Wiley 1977a). The skull contained significant unneumetized windows. The testes measured 5.5 millimeters in diameter (right) and 7 x 5 millimeters (long dimensions of the elliptical-shaped, left). Because the bird was held in captivity for several days, weight was not recorded, though the bird was moderately fat. The specimen was deposited in the Oklahoma Museum of Natural History at the University of Oklahoma.

At least two other states also reported their first Shiny Cowbird observations during 1990: Texas (mentioned above) and Alabama. In Alabama, observations were first made at Fort Morgan on April 25. By the end of May, at least 45 birds were reported there and from three other localities in the state (Jackson 1990).

Considerable concern is already being expressed about the potential impact of the Shiny Cowbird on certain passerine populations in Florida, where in addition, the Brown-headed Cowbird is progressing down the Florida Peninsula (Paul 1987, 1988, 1989). These passerine populations in Florida may be particularly vulnerable as they have no past history of cowbird parasitism. Both Shiny Cowbirds in Texas and Oklahoma appeared in areas where a sensitive species, the Black-capped Vireo, occurs.

Where the Shiny Cowbird is added to an avifauna already subjected to pressures of nest parasitism by Brown-headed Cowbirds, its effects may be dampened by interspecific competition and potential for hybrid matings. Time will tell. Both Shiny Cowbirds at the inland localities occurred where cowbird trapping was being carried out to suppress local cowbird populations.

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—Department of Biology, Central State University, Edmond, OK 73034 (Gryzbowski); Department of Zoological and Biomedical Sciences, Ohio University, Athens, OH 45701 (Fazio).

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