

Of cowbirds and horses: nineteen-year summary

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As a backyard bander, I have trapped and banded a variety of birds in the 19 years I have lived in this rural part of Ulster County, New York. While cowbirds continue each year to briefly touch down in flocks during spring and fall migration, fewer birds have stayed during the breeding season in recent years than in previous years. Somewhat puzzled by this phenomenon, I have examined possible environmental factors. I discovered an interesting correlation between the decline of lingering cowbirds and a large herbivore species we kept for 8 years — horses.

The literature documents the close relationship between large herbivores and cowbirds. Coues (1874) noted that flocks of these birds followed every wagon train passing over the prairie in the summer. This race, the Nevada Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater artemesiaae*) would descend on every camp and corral, permanent or temporary, where it gleaned from the wasted forage. The relationship was so intimate between this species and livestock that the birds often perched on the backs or wandered around the feet of draft animals.

Widman (1907) theorized that the wandering habits of the "buffalo bird" (the cowbird's former common name) as it followed migrating herds of wild cattle and, particularly, the plains buffalo, may have contributed to the loss of nesting and brooding instincts in this bird. Widman concluded that, as they followed the roving animals, the cowbirds would be too far from home at egg-laying time and, in desperation, would lay their eggs in the nearest nests they could find. Burleigh (1936) suggested that cowbirds lay eggs during migration in the spring.

Much has been learned by banders about the behavior

Table 1. Brown-headed Cowbirds banded at New Paltz, NY, 1964-1982, as related to the presence or absence of horses.

Year	No. of horses	No. of birds banded	Year	No. of horses	No. of birds banded
1964	0	9	1974	0	0
1965	1	29	1975	0	3
1966	1	21	1976	0	2
1967	2	13	1977	0	0
1968	2	10	1978	0	3
1969	2	40	1979	0	0
1970	2	4	1980	0	0
1971	1	11	1981	0	0
1972	1	24	1982	0	0
1973	0	3			

and other natural history aspects of this species. Gillespie (1973), who banded 1,320 cowbirds in 12 years in Glenolden, Pennsylvania, noted that they moved around a great deal in the winter months; she rarely trapped repeats. During the breeding season, they seemed to stay in one area and exhibited strong homing instincts. While I am not familiar with this suburb of Philadelphia, I would guess that horses are nearby! [Ed: horses and pigs.]

Burt and Giltz (1977) discovered from their banding and recovery records in Brazos County, Texas, that wintering cowbirds in that state come from much of North America, including the Mississippi River drainage, adjacent parts of southern Canada, and even the eastern seaboard. I know little of that section of Texas, but I would venture that it is cattle and horse country! [Ed.: yes.]

Table 1 shows the number of cowbirds banded vs. number of horses at my New Paltz residence for 15 years. Although the sample is small, the data would suggest that the number of cowbirds which linger long enough in the spring to be banded correlates well with the nearby presence of farm animals. During this same period, the nearest livestock — a 50-cow dairy herd — was about one mile away, and they, too, were sold by 1972, the same year I sold my last horse.

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