

This resource is based on the following source:

Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

This resource can be cited as:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2003, January 6. Florida's breeding bird atlas: A collaborative study of Florida's birdlife. <http://www.myfwc.com/bba/> (Date accessed mm/dd/yyyy).

Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater*

A common to abundant winter resident throughout Florida, the Brown-headed Cowbird is a relatively recent addition to the state's list of breeding birds.

Ehrlich et al. (1988) call female cowbirds, "passerine chickens" because of the lack of "physiological demarcation" between clutches. A female may lay as many as 40 eggs a year for 2 years! In North America 220 species of birds have been parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds, 144 of these successfully (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

Habitat. According to Stevenson and Anderson (1994), this species is found in "any habitat where perching birds breed and the landscape affords the species some vantage point from which to observe any potential breeding host." The Brown-headed Cowbird is an obligate brood parasite, meaning it lays its eggs only in the nest of other birds, usually smaller songbirds. The young Brown-headed Cowbird typically hatches first and then crowds out the young of the host species by receiving a larger amount of food from its "foster parents." Thus, a bird whose nest is parasitized by cowbirds often fails to successfully raise any of its own young. For species with a limited range or a small breeding population, brood parasitism by cowbirds can have disastrous effects. The Kirtland's Warbler (*Dendroica kirtlandii*), which breeds only in central Michigan, would be extinct today if cowbirds were not eliminated from its breeding range (Sykes 1996).



Illustration © 1995 Diane Pierce, All Rights Reserved.

In Florida, Brown-headed Cowbirds (and possibly also Shiny Cowbirds) may jeopardize the breeding population of the Black-whiskered Vireo, Florida Prairie Warbler, Cuban Yellow Warbler, Florida Grasshopper Sparrow, and Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow. All these birds occur in the southern half of the peninsula, an area only recently invaded by cowbirds. The effects of brood parasitism on these species are unknown, but the decrease in Gray Kingbirds and virtual extirpations of Black-whiskered Vireos and Florida Prairie Warbler from Pinellas and Hillsborough counties during the latter 1980s have been blamed on cowbird brood parasitism (L. Atherton in Langridge 1987, L. Atherton in Paul 1987, Paul 1988). In limited experiments in 1995 and 1996, Florida Scrub-Jays (a species only recently affected by cowbirds) in Highlands County removed simulated cowbird eggs placed in their nests (D. Burhans and G. Woolfenden, pers. commun.).

During the 6 field seasons of the Atlas project (1986-1991), cowbird eggs were found in nests of the Indigo Bunting, Blue Grosbeak, and Eastern Towhee. Other species observed feeding fledgling Brown-headed Cowbird in Florida during the Atlas project were Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, White-eyed Vireo, Red-eyed Vireo, Black-whiskered Vireo, Northern Parula, Yellow-throated Warbler, Pine Warbler, Prairie Warbler, Common Yellowthroat, Summer Tanager, Northern Cardinal, Painted Bunting, Red-winged Blackbird, and Orchard Oriole (BBA data).

Seasonal Occurrence. Brown-headed Cowbirds are permanent residents in Florida, with the additions of birds that breed farther north in fall and winter. Eggs have been found May through July.

Status. First discovered breeding in Pensacola in 1956 (Monroe 1957), Brown-headed Cowbirds were common the Panhandle by 1980 and had spread into the peninsula at Gainesville (Hintermister and Coggins in Edscorn 1980). By 1985 they were breeding south to at least Pinellas County (Hoffman and Woolfenden 1986), and Atl

data show that the Brown-headed Cowbird now breeds throughout the mainland, although south Florida records are still widely scattered. Expansion into the Keys may occur in the future.

The Florida Atlas accepted all records of an adult bird (of any species) feeding a fledgling Brown-headed Cowbird as confirmed breeding for both species. However, a sighting of this nature is not always proof that the cowbird was raised by the species seen feeding it. This is well-illustrated by Klein and Rosenberg (1986), Scott (1988), and by an observation by Marge Lynch (pers. commun.) in Citrus County. In 1989 she observed 3 fledgling cowbirds being fed by a pair of adult cowbirds! Nevertheless, the Atlas considered a species feeding a young Brown-headed Cowbird to be breeding confirmations for both species.

With the number of breeding Brown-headed Cowbirds increasing annually in Florida, it may soon become necessary to control their numbers in order to prevent the extirpations of some of Florida's unique breeding birds.

Bill Pranty

Sponsored by Alexander Cruz

Brown-headed Cowbird

