

## Brown-headed Cowbird *Molothrus ater*



**Folk Name:** Cow Blackbird, Buffalo Bird

**Status:** Resident

**Abundance:** Fairly Common to Common

**Habitat:** Open woods, residential areas, farms, pastures, plowed fields

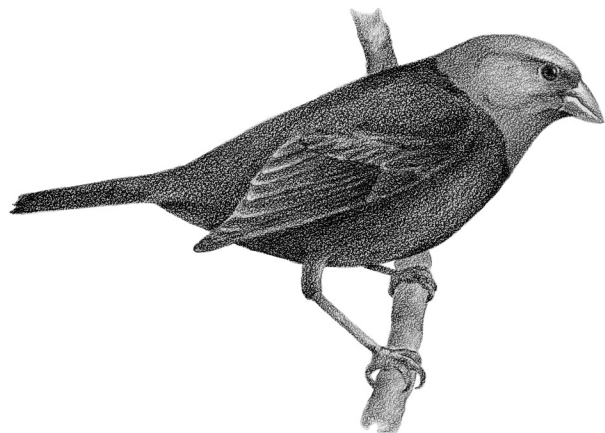
The Brown-headed Cowbird is our second smallest and perhaps our most unusual member of the blackbird family. At 7 ½ inches, it's only about half an inch bigger than an Eastern Bluebird and a fourth an inch bigger than the Orchard Oriole, our smallest Icterid. Adult males have a black body, dark brown head and eye, a short stout bill, fairly long pointed wings, and a short tail. The female is a plain gray-brown bird.

This bird is a common permanent resident across the Carolina Piedmont. During breeding season it is found in a variety of habitat types. In winter it prefers open country. Winter flocks, augmented with birds from the North, have been estimated in the thousands. These birds spend their days foraging in open fields by day and roosting in large groups in surrounding trees at night. Birders estimated the number of Brown-headed Cowbirds seen on the Chester Christmas Bird Count on December 29, 1977, at 100,000 birds.

The cowbird is unique in that it is a brood parasite. It is our only songbird that does not build a nest or raise its young. Instead, the female secretly lays an egg in the nest of another type of bird and then abandons it. The host parent broods the egg and raises it as its own. The young cowbird is usually larger than the other nestlings and at times kills or out competes its nestmates for food, thus often becoming the sole survivor. After fledging, the young cowbird joins other cowbirds and spends the fall and winter together in large flocks, often with other types of blackbirds, starlings, or robins.

At one time, the Brown-headed Cowbird bred only in the central prairie regions of the United States. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, this species began to expand its breeding range eastward. In 1879, Loomis listed this species as common during the winter and most abundant during spring and fall migration in Chester County, but he found no evidence of breeding.

Elmer Brown reported a flock of 40 visiting the athletic fields on the campus of Davidson College in Mecklenburg County on March 18, 1928. He killed a male to provide confirmation of his identification, and he sent detailed length and wing measurements of this specimen to C.S. Brimley at the North Carolina State Museum. William McIlwaine reported sightings in Charlotte 3 years in a row: six on March 16, 1929; 300 on March 10, 1930; and a flock of 50 on March 16, 1931.



Breeding of the Brown-headed Cowbird was first confirmed in the Carolinas in 1934 in South Carolina at Clemson; then in North Carolina in 1936 at Weaverville by Ernest Lyda. Cowbirds were found in Stanly County in June 1957, but breeding was not confirmed. The first confirmed breeding in the Central Carolinas was in Mecklenburg County in 1958.

On July 11, 1958, Becky Norwood observed a juvenile Brown-headed Cowbird being fed by a Red-eyed Vireo adult at Camp Stewart in the eastern part of the county. The bird was relocated on 12 July by Joe Norwood and was observed begging the Red-eyed Vireo for food. The fledgling, larger than the adult, was “making a metallic clicking noise and fluttering its wings, its beak open.” It dropped the first insect given, but “the Vireo nabbed another insect which it was this time successful in poking down the Cowbird’s throat.” Joe Norwood watched a male Eastern Towhee feed a young Brown-headed Cowbird in

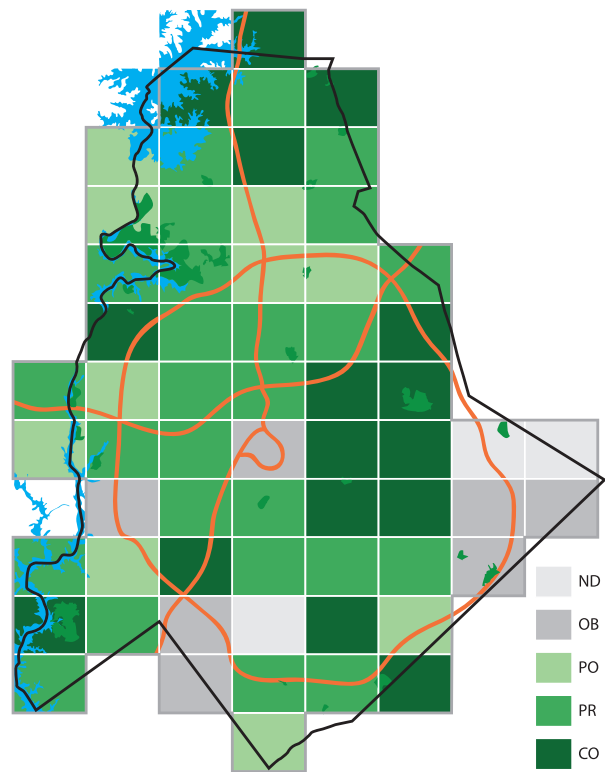


Male Brown-headed Cowbird. (Jim Guyton)

his backyard in Charlotte on May 27, 1963.

Nesting cowbirds had expanded as far as the South Carolina Coastal Plain by 1965. Today, the Brown-headed Cowbird is a common to abundant breeding bird throughout both Carolinas. The high-pitched whistle call of the male at the top of a tree in spring is a sure sign that a female will soon be skulking about in search of a host nest in which to lay her egg.

The Brown-headed Cowbird was determined to be a nearly ubiquitous breeder in Mecklenburg County during the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas study. It ranked as the 18th most common breeding bird.



### **Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:**

*Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/26, CO/16)*