

Bird feeding in the Eastern Sierra

How to take good care of your favorite birds

Watching birds is fun, and setting up feeders can help you see beautiful bird species in your own yard. However, bird feeding must be done thoughtfully in order to take good care of the birds. Feeders that are improperly maintained can attract parasitic species, such as Brown-headed Cowbirds.

*Want to be a conscientious bird feeder?
Here are the two most important things
you can do to take good care of birds:*

- 1** Know what birds are visiting your feeder.
- 2** Use bird feeders that are safe for all birds.



The Brown-headed Cowbird nestling on the left is quite large next to its host species, the adult Dusky Flycatcher on the right.

Do you have cowbirds at your feeder?

It's exciting to have birds come to your bird feeder, but if you're feeding a Brown-headed Cowbird it may contribute to the downfall of other species of birds. Brown-headed Cowbirds are small, black and have a brown head and a relatively thick, dark, bill. Cowbirds are parasites, which means they exploit host bird species.



Birds to watch out for at your feeder: a male cowbird, left and a female, right. Males have brown heads and glossy black bodies, while females are mottled gray and brown.



A large cowbird in the front center crowds three flycatcher nestlings. None of the flycatcher young survived.

What's the problem with cowbirds?

Cowbirds locate the nests of other birds, such as Yellow Warblers, Song Sparrows, and Willow Flycatchers, and lay their own eggs in them, leaving it up to the host species to raise the cowbird chick. Sometimes the host will recognize the intrusion and abandon the nest or build a new nest on top, but more often than not, the host species will raise the parasite while its own eggs fail to hatch or its own nestlings starve. Since cowbird chicks hatch and grow quickly, they have an advantage over the other nestlings and are able to out-compete the others for food, which seriously threatens the host's nestlings chance of survival.

It's important to feed birds carefully

Many of the cowbirds in Lee Vining and Mono City feed at feeders during breeding season. This supports higher numbers of cowbirds than could otherwise survive in the Eastern Sierra. Since parasitized nests have a severely decreased chance of producing host fledglings, cowbirds can drive host species to local extinction.

Along Mono Lake's tributary streams 50% of Yellow Warblers, 67% of Song Sparrows, and 48% of the already-endangered Willow Flycatcher have been observed to have nests that are parasitized by cowbirds! By providing Brown-headed Cowbirds with food, humans assist in the decrease of other bird populations.

How to feed birds without encouraging cowbirds

There are a variety of feeders that are safe to use. Here are some guidelines for purchasing or evaluating your bird feeder:

1. Avoid feeders where seed is piled or scattered such as open platform or ground feeders without guards to keep out larger birds.
2. Use a seed mix with little or no millet. This will help keep cowbirds away as it is one of their favorite types of seed.
3. Use thistle feeders to attract goldfinches.
4. Use fruit-feeders to attract birds such as orioles.
5. Use nectar feeders to attract hummingbirds.

If you see that cowbirds are visiting your bird feeder, the responsible thing to do is to change your feeder. Make sure you're helping, not hurting, birds!



DONNA WILLEY

A Warbling Vireo, left, feeding a fledgling cowbird, right.



CHRIS MCCREEDY

A Yellow Warbler, one species that is highly susceptible to cowbird parasitism.



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