

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

So That's Where They Were!

Early in the morning of 15 February 1982, I had the thrill of a life time. When I arose from bed and came into the den, I noticed one Evening Grosbeak on one of my feeders. Then in a matter of minutes grosbeaks came down in great quantities. I counted 50 shuttling back and forth from the hemlock tree to my feeders. Then again, on 16 and 17 February I recorded 50 each day. I recorded anywhere from 4 to 35 each day until 22 April, when a flock of 35 lighted in the hemlock tree and then flew away. That was the last we saw of the grosbeaks. The location is in Transylvania County, N.C., about 10 miles SE of Brevard and 5 miles S of US 276, about 1.5 miles from the South Carolina border.

On 12 December 1981, I was sitting in my den when I noticed seeds falling from the hemlock trees in my yard as though it were snowing. I got up to check the reason, and discovered the tree was filled with Pine Siskins. Then they started coming down to my feeders. I counted 45. On most any given day from then on until 7 April 1982, I could see from 35 to 40 on the feeders, usually in the early mornings.—ROSA LEE HARDIN, Star Route, Cleveland, S.C. 29635

The Cowbird Connection

As a good many of you readers know, I have spent a considerable amount of time and energy observing Brown-headed Cowbirds. Why? Simply because they are there—at a time when backyard birding is rather dull and routine. I had a fascinating experience with one of five fledglings that were “dumped” on me by their host parents, Rufous-sided Towhees. This has happened a number of years. When the towhees were ready to turn these over-sized, noisy, and worrisome youngsters out on their own, they led them to my yard where they quickly learned to take my hand-outs.

From 9 August to 10 September 1979, I had the opportunity to study five cowbird fledglings rather intensively (and kept copious notes). I learned a number of interesting facts relating to their behaviour. For instance, a cowbird fledgling is easily “tamed,” showing little fear of humans—especially those offering food.

Also, the little fellows soon recognize their own kind and tend to stick together once the host parent has ceased to feed them.

Cowbird number five appeared on 27 August, being fed by a male towhee. On 30 August, the towhee ceased to feed the female fledgling, and she came to me frequently for hand-outs. She became quite tame. She could recognize the sound of my voice and often came flying to me for food. Once she even came up on my back porch and looked in the door, upon hearing my voice. When she finished eating her morning meal, she wandered about the lawn, drinking droplets of dew from the grass and occasionally catching and eating small insects. She discovered that by coming right to my feet, she could get all the food she wanted without having to hassle the other hungry birds I was feeding. She often stayed nearby my husband and me as we sat out on the lawn in the evenings, and on one occasion lit on his hand for a moment. She appeared to trust us completely. She was easy to identify as she had one white primary feather on the left wing.

On 7 September something happened which so impressed me that I will never forget it. I quote here from my notes:

"After supper I fed him* (#5 cowbird) and he stayed around. He followed me all around the yard. I wondered why he was so fearless and why he stayed so near my feet. Noticed he would catch and eat tiny insects from time to time. It occurred to me that perhaps he, being a cowbird, was instinctively following at my feet to find any insects which I might stir up as I moved about the lawn. I kept moving about the grass, scuffing my feet from time to time. Apparently this did cause insects to appear, for little cowbird would dart this way and that and picked up things too small for me to see. As it grew darker, he kept looking at sky often. Finally he flew off into trees."

*At time of this incident, I did not know sex of bird.

I last saw and fed #5 cowbird on 10 September. In the days following the first time I "played cow" with her, I did it several more times. The bird seemed eager for me to stir up insects and the "game" might last for 10 to 15 minutes. The more insects she caught, the less hand-out food she wanted. She always kept an eye on me as I moved about so as to avoid being stepped on, but, at the same time was on the alert for any insects flushed in the process. It really was a lot of fun and must have been quite a sight had anyone been watching. During these days the little bird appeared to be growing rather restless. She had also begun her post-juvinal molt. When she disappeared (as the young cowbirds always do), it never occurred to me that I would see her again.

In early April of 1980, two female Brown-headed Cowbirds came near me as I was tossing out food to the many "freeloaders" in my backyard. One of these females, in the company of a male, returned at least once every day for food for about a month or so. The male, although shy and suspicious at first, began to partake of the food, too. He never came as close as the female. On 18 May the

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In western North Carolina, Asheville bird club members are assisting U.S. Fish and Wildlife personnel with a survey of Great Horned Owls in preparation for a planned Peregrine Falcon hacking program. For about 7 weeks they observed nesting owls at Lake Julian Park from a blind constructed some 35 feet above ground. An article in *Asheville South*, 22 June 1982, reported that the adult owls were aware of the visitors and never went to the nest while anyone was in the blind. Park officials protected the two fledgling owls by not releasing news of their presence until after they left the nest.

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female cowbird was feeding on some birdseed. I tossed out some of my food and she flew to my feet and ate. Then, as she did not make any move to leave, I began walking slowly about the lawn. The cowbird followed me. I began scuffing my feet through the grass and, to my surprise and delight, she followed me and began looking for insects. However, this early in the spring there were none to be found, so she gave up and flew away. This pretty well convinced me that she had to be my little #5 cowbird of the summer preceding—no other bird would have responded to my actions in that same manner. We never did have the opportunity to “play cow” again. Oh how I wished that I had been able to have banded that little fledgling!

Although the pair of adult cowbirds stayed around until July, I never did have any new young fledglings to feed and study that summer—nor the next one, either. Maybe this year, come hot, sticky, dull August, I will once again have the chance to “play cow.”—GAIL T. WHITEHURST, 1505 Brooks Avenue, Raleigh, N.C. 27607