

## The Brown-headed Cowbird- LMT Bird of the Month for May 2025



The cowbird is a fascinating species known primarily for its unique reproductive strategy called *brood parasitism*. Unlike most birds, cowbirds do not build nests or raise their own young. Instead, female cowbirds lay their eggs in the nests of other bird species—sometimes over 100 different kinds—leaving the burden of incubation and chick-rearing to unsuspecting host parents. The cowbird chick often hatches earlier and grows faster than its nestmates, outcompeting them for food and sometimes pushing them out of the nest entirely.

This strategy is evolutionarily advantageous for cowbirds, allowing them to invest energy in producing more eggs rather than raising young. However, it has significant impacts on host species, many of which experience reduced reproductive success. Some host birds have developed defenses, such as recognizing and rejecting cowbird eggs, but the cowbird has also evolved to counter these tactics. For example, cowbirds may monitor nests and retaliate by destroying eggs if their own are removed—a behavior nicknamed “mafia behavior.”

Cowbirds also stand out for their ecological adaptability. Originally native to the open plains of North America, where they followed bison herds to feed on insects stirred up by the animals, cowbirds have thrived in modern fragmented landscapes. Deforestation and agriculture have expanded their range, bringing them into contact with forest-dwelling birds that are more vulnerable to brood parasitism.

The cowbird’s behavior raises compelling questions about coevolution, ecological balance, and the unintended consequences of human landscape change, making it one of the most intriguing species in avian biology.

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