



# Cooper's Talk

Robert Cooper Audubon Society

## Cowbirds: Scoundrels or Unjustifiably Reviled?

By Rose Jeffery

I have been dismayed this summer to find an increased number of cowbirds visiting my feeders. We always have a few, and often see a cardinal feeding a cowbird juvenile, but this summer we have had a continuing presence of 4-5 cowbirds at, and under, our feeders. Why should I be dismayed? They are native birds, but have a bad reputation. I decided to learn more about these birds.

Cowbirds are part of the family Icteridae, which includes other blackbirds, orioles, and meadowlarks. Cowbirds are New World birds. Of the five cowbird species, three occur in North America. Only one, the Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*), is found in the mid-western United States. The Brown-headed

Cowbird is a small bird with a thick, dark, conical bill. Males have shiny, black bodies and brown heads. Females are brown all over, a little lighter under the throat, and have subtle brown streaking on the breast and belly. Juveniles are a lighter tan with some white streaking on their backs. All have dark eyes.

### Song

Brown-headed Cowbirds have delightful songs and calls. Males sing a watery *glug-glug glee*. The female chattering call can sound a bit like a House Wren.

### Brood Parasites

With the exception of the Bay-winged Cowbird of South America, all cowbirds are brood parasites. This is the chief source of their notoriety. Brood parasites lay their eggs in the nests of other birds, and depend upon those birds to raise their young. Cowbirds are obligate brood parasites. They do not build nests of their own, and could not survive as a species except through brood parasitism. The female cowbird watches active nest sites and will lay one egg in a host nest that generally has at least one host egg in it. After mating in the spring, she will lay one egg a day in various host nests for 5-6 days. After a few days off, she will repeat the cycle. A female cowbird can lay 40 eggs in a season.

Cowbird eggs tend to hatch earlier than the host eggs, so the hatchlings are usually larger than the host hatchlings and often exhibit more aggressive begging behaviors. Cowbird hatchlings can sometimes push host young out of the nests.

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**A Brood Parasite**

**Its eggs and young cared for by other birds**



Brown-headed Cowbird. Photo by Rob & Ann Simpson/MIREO  
Retrieved from [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org)

## Monthly Programs

September 14, Noon-2:00 pm: Mounds State Park, Anderson, IN

### RCAS Annual Picnic

It's our tradition! Member of Robert Cooper Audubon Society launch the fall migration with an annual picnic at Mounds State Park. Bring a friend and gather at the Locust Grove Shelter by 12:30 pm to share a potluck picnic and spend the afternoon sharing an appreciation for birds and nature.

Please bring a dish or dessert to share, as well as your own reusable place setting (plate, utensils, and a cup). Drinks and entertainment will be provided. Entrance fee is \$7 per vehicle for in-state plates and \$2 for pedestrians and bicyclists.



Black-tailed Trainbearer. Photo by Suzanne Labbé.  
Retrieved from <https://ebird.org/species/blttra>

October 9, 7-9 pm: Kennedy Library, Muncie, IN

### From cloud forests to deserts: A journey through Ecuador and The Galapagos Islands

Kamal Islam, professor of Biology and board member of RCAS, will introduce us to the birds of Ecuador, one of the megadiverse countries of the world with over 1600 species of birds. He'll share sightings of endemics from the Andean páramo, with its Andean Condor, Andean Ibis, and Andean Lapwing, to the Galapagos Islands with Lava Gull and Galapagos Penguins. He'll delight us with sounds of Andean Cock-of-the-Rock, and share stories of hummingbirds with 6.5" long tails or 4" long bills.

Learn more about "Why birdwatchers flock to Ecuador" at <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/birdwatchers-flock-ecuador-180956466/>

November 13, 7-9 pm: Pruis Hall, Ball State University

### Bird of Prey: The Story of the Rarest Eagle on Earth

This award-winning documentary reveals the plight of the Great Philippine Eagle and the inspiring people who are working to save this critically endangered species from the extinction. The cinematography of Neil Rettig offers unprecedented views of the behavior and forest domain of the eagle. This documentary was produced by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and this viewing is co-sponsored by Robert Cooper Audubon Society and the Student Chapter of The Wildlife Society.

Invite your friends and neighbors to join you for this intriguing look at the Phillipine Eagle.



Great Philippine Eagle. Photo by Kike Arnal.  
Retrieved from <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/in-the-aerie-of-the-philippine-eagle/>

# Of Raspberries & Time Moving On

By Jim Schowe, RCAS Board Member

It is July 4th, another hot day in east-central Indiana. Our first national holiday spent in our new rural home as permanent residents. The hay field has been mowed and harvested and the bales have been stored off the property. It is time to harvest one of nature's tastiest treasures, the black raspberry. Actually, today was my second trip into the overgrown fence rows to gather the dark, juice-filled fruit. The first picking took about one and one-half hours and resulted in over a gallon of berries. Today's picking was just to get fresh fruit for a couple of pies. My wife, Jane, has the pastries in the oven as I type this note and the aroma is amazing.

Before I married, forty-two years ago, I had never picked a black raspberry in my life. It was Jane, almost seven months pregnant, who took me out for the first time. Something clicked in my mind, and I guess on my taste buds too, because I have been picking them ever since. I am the father of four sons and each child rode in a backpack during the June-July

picking season, absorbing the ups and downs of dad reaching into the berry canes to pick fruit. It took four children to finally wear out that backpack. There's nothing like purple stains on your neck from a berry-eating infant riding on your back! I found the blue, cloth-covered aluminum-frame backpack in the attic as we were searching for things to bring to our new house. The mice seemed to think that it was a nice place to raise their young, too, as I found the remains of their housing in the seat area of the pack. Though the backpack is now gone, the memories live on.

I can avow that my life has been enriched by my love of nature. Each season brings new experiences and old memories to the forefront.



## Award Nominations

### Nominate an Unsung Conservation or Environmental Education Hero

Each November, Robert Cooper Audubon celebrates individuals and organizations who make noteworthy contributions to conservation and environmental education in our region. Help us celebrate an unsung conservation hero by submitting a nomination to Annette Rose at [rosenflowers@hughes.net](mailto:rosenflowers@hughes.net)

When submitting a nomination, please describe the nominee's contributions and provide contact information. Nominations must be received by September 21. Award nominees need not reside in our chapter's seven county region or be affiliated with the Audubon Society. A list of past recipients is linked from the RCAS website at the bottom of the "Monthly Programs" page. Award categories include:

**Robert H. and Esther L. Cooper Conservation Award:** the chapter's highest honor, for overall contributions to, conservation of, and appreciation for the natural environment;

**Clyde W. Hibbs Conservation Education Award:** for excellence in educating the area's children, youth, and /or adults on conservation issues and practices;

**Richard Greene Public Service Award:** for active involvement in serving the public's environmental interests and concerns;

**Phyllis Yuhas Wildlife Habitat Preservation Award:** for development or preservation of habitat that contains significant wildlife and/or native plant life populations; and

**Charles D. Wise Youth Conservation Award:** for excellence in conservation practices by a youth under the age of 18.

### Conservation

The vision, sweat and hard work that creates and maintains habitats where native wildlife and birds thrive.

## Field Trips

August 31, 9 -11 am: 4306 Mounds Road, Anderson, IN

### **Birding at Mounds State Park**

Join our monthly field trip at Mounds State Park. Meet at the feeder viewing station inside the Visitor Center. Binoculars will be available.

September 7, 9 -10:30 am: Amvets Drive, Hartford City, IN

### **Birding at Wilderness Park**

Take SR 3 North from Muncie. At the south side of Hartford City turn left at Amvets Drive between the Dollar General and Richards Restaurant. Casey's gas station is on the right. Go four blocks to the parking lot on the right.

September 21, 8 – Noon: Westside Park, Muncie

### **White River Clean-up**

Protecting the White River from solid waste and pollution is a prerequisite for protecting the health of Great Blue and Green Herons, Belted Kingfishers, Bald Eagles, and other wildlife. Join volunteers from RCAS to assist in that annual White River Clean-up by contacting Kim McKenzie at [kimkenzie34@gmail.com](mailto:kimkenzie34@gmail.com)



Savannah Lundgren, education chair, shares bird specimens during Nature Play Day at Apple Tree Child Development Center on June 6, 2019. Photo by Robert Williams.

September 21, 9 - 11 am:  
200 E. 6th Street, Geneva, IN

### **Limberlost State Historic Site**

We will meet at the Limberlost Visitor Center in Geneva at 9:00 am. Carpoolers will leave from the Cooper Science lot on the Ball State campus at 7:50 am. To get there on your own: From Muncie take N. Broadway and continue north on SR 67. Follow 67 through Albany to Portland. In Portland SR 67 takes a left. Continue on 67 into Bryant where you should continue straight onto north 27 at the traffic light. (SR 67 turns right at this point.) Once in Geneva, turn right into the Visitor Center parking lot at 200 E 6th Street.

September 28, 9 -11 am:  
4306 Mounds Road, Anderson, IN

### **Birding at Mounds State Park**

Join our monthly field trip at Mounds State Park. Meet at the feeder viewing station inside the Visitor Center. Binoculars will be available.

October 12, 9 - 11 am: Intersection of CR 150N and SR 103, New Castle, IN

### **Birding at Wilbur Wright Trail Project**

We will meet at the Wilbur Wright Trail trailhead at the south end of Wilbur Wright Fish and Wildlife Area at 9 am. Carpooling is encouraged as there is limited parking at the trailhead with only 7 spaces. Carpoolers will leave from the Cooper Science lot at 8:20 am.

To get there on your own: Head south on SR 3 from Muncie. Turn left on SR 36 heading toward Summit Lake. Travel on SR 36 for about 2 miles and then turn right (south) on SR 103 and travel about 3 1/2 miles to the Wilbur Wright Trail trailhead parking area at CR 150N and SR 103.

## Field Trips

October 26, 9 -11 am: 4306 Mounds Road, Anderson, IN

### Birding at Mounds State Park

Join our monthly field trip at Mounds State Park. Meet at the feeder viewing station inside the Visitor Center. Binoculars will be available.

November 2, 10-11:30 am: East 650 South Road, Selma, IN

### Birding at Red Tail Preserve and Prairie Creek

Let's search for migrating water fowl and resident passerines along the trail of Red-tail Nature Preserve and the shore of Prairie Creek Reservoir. We'll meet at the parking lot of Red-tail Nature Preserve, just off South County Road 461 East. For more details see <http://www.fortheland.org/red-tail-nature-preserve/>

## Feature Story

### Cowbirds continued

It kind of offends a sense of fair play, doesn't it? Several potential host species have developed defenses against brood parasitism. Jays, robins, catbirds, thrashers, and orioles can recognize and evict cowbird eggs. Other species, such as the Blue-gray Gnatcatcher, will abandon nests with cowbird eggs in them. Yellow Warblers will bury the foreign cowbird egg under nesting material and it will not survive.

Some cowbird eggs are laid in nests of inappropriate hosts. The cowbird hatchlings need a high-protein (insect) diet to survive. If their "foster parents" are House Finches and bring only seeds, they will starve. It is estimated that only 3% of cowbird eggs result in living adult birds. It seems the cowbirds (at least the females) work hard to extend their species to the next generations. They do not seem very particular as to type of host nest, though they mostly target open nests rather than cavities. There are records of 220 host species whose nests have been parasitized by Brown-headed Cowbirds, and successful fledging of cowbirds has been recorded in only 140 host species.

Why have cowbirds evolved this elaborate strategy? Their original range before widespread human settlement in North America was the Great Plains. They are ground foragers and had learned to follow bison herds, which would stir up a nice buffet of insects for the birds. The theory is that leaving the rearing of

young to other species allowed cowbirds the freedom to follow the herds. With the clearing of forests and addition of agricultural grazing animals, the range has increased dramatically. During the summer, cowbirds eat primarily insects including grasshoppers and other agricultural "pests." They also eat seed of common weeds and grain, but being ground foragers, they consume mostly waste agricultural grain.

### Impacts on Other Birds

How do cowbirds affect other bird populations? Some common hosts—including Red-eyed Vireos, Yellow Warblers, Chipping Sparrows—seem to maintain their populations well. Other species, such as Kirtland's and Prothonotary Warblers, and Black-capped Vireos, are threatened more seriously by cowbird predation. Cowbirds in the eastern United States are found in suburban areas, fields, and areas with bush and woodland edges. They generally avoid forests. With increasing fragmentation of our forests, we are inviting greater penetration of cowbirds into woodland bird habitat. We can not fairly blame the cowbird for exploiting this invitation.

I am still rather dismayed by my cowbirds, but I am glad to have learned more about this interesting species. Let's strive to prevent further forest fragmentation!

**Let's  
strive  
to prevent  
forest  
fragmentation.**



# Robert Cooper Audubon Society

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## Can you HELP?

*Cooper's Talk* is an important service provided to members of Robert Cooper Audubon Society. This newsletter alerts the entire community about opportunities to join field excursions, attend program meetings, advocate for the birds, participate in conservation activities, or simply keep in touch with others who strive to protect and enhance the quality of our natural environment.

Could you help sustain this newsletter as an important service of our Society? Please consider lending your skills in writing, photography, or graphic layout to prepare and distribute future newsletters to our membership.

To join the RCAS newsletter team, contact Annette Rose, President of RCAS, at [rosenflowers@hughes.net](mailto:rosenflowers@hughes.net).

## Society Leadership

### Officers

President:	Mary Annette Rose	765-774-3134
Vice-President:	Robert Williams	765-730-8427
Treasurer:	Robert Williams	765-730-8427
Secretary:	Kim Lee	765-215-0576

### Directors

2019-2021	Kamal Islam Kim McKenzie
2018-2020	Catherine Pauls Kubo Jim Schowe

### Committees

Past President:	Sarah McKillip
Advocacy (ad hoc):	Brandon Connare
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Field Trip:	Catherine Pauls Kubo
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Newsletter:	Vacant
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Website Manager:	Barb Stedman
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## About Cooper's Talk

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Cooper's Talk is published five times per year for members of Robert Cooper Audubon Society.

### Submissions

All are invited to submit photos, articles, and events for publication by emailing items to [admin@cooperaudubon.org](mailto:admin@cooperaudubon.org).

### Membership

Robert Cooper Audubon Society is a chapter of the National Audubon Society serving Blackford, Delaware, Grant, Henry, Jay, Madison, and Randolph counties.

### Programs and Field Trips

Most programs and field trips of the Society are free and open to the public. Programs are scheduled from October through June on the second Wednesday of the month and, typically, held at Kennedy Library at 7:00 pm. For a schedule of field trips, refer to the Society website at [www.cooperaudubon.org](http://www.cooperaudubon.org).

### Contact Us

Chapter Website: [www.cooperaudubon.org](http://www.cooperaudubon.org)  
Find us on Facebook!  
Email: [admin@cooperaudubon.org](mailto:admin@cooperaudubon.org)