

Cowbirds and Unsuspecting Cavity Nesters

By Patrick Ready WB Editor

In a recent issue of the *Bluebird* journal I read with interest an article about Brown-headed Cowbirds pre-dating on cavity nesters. The article's final conclusion was that cowbirds don't lay eggs in nests of cavity nesting species. My own experiences from my trails in 2008 proved to the contrary.

Let's go back a few years. My friend Jack Bartholmai from Beaver Dam, Wisconsin sent me some photos he took of a pair of adult bluebirds feeding a young cowbird chick on the ground. Jack included nest box photos and some record information. He was checking his trail when he discovered the cowbird egg inside. He decided to leave it and see what would happen. It didn't take long before the cowbird chick was hatched and begging for food. I ran the photos and a short article in the *Wisconsin Bluebird* newsletter in the fall of 2006.

After the article ran, I started getting calls and emails from other bluebirders who were experiencing the same thing in recent years. I asked them if they knew what had changed. Some thought it may have been due to using nest boxes with the oval hole entrance. But this didn't apply to everyone as others had boxes with the standard 1-1/2" round entrance.

In May of last season I was checking some nest boxes and opened a Peterson box I knew had Black-capped Chickadees nesting. To my surprise I found 1 cowbird egg in with 4 chickadee eggs. I decided to leave the egg and watch the box closely to see what took place. Cowbirds are legally protected by the Migratory Bird Act, the same one that protects bluebirds and all native songbirds. Removing eggs is illegal. One week later when I returned the cowbird was a monster compared to the chickadees. (see photo) One chickadee egg did not hatch but I'm not sure if the cowbird egg was the cause.

Returning a week later I discovered the cowbird had already fledged. There were 4 chickadees inside the



The first photo shows a cowbird egg (speckled) in a bluebird nest. The second photo shows a cowbird chick begging with 3 Black-capped Chickadees. The third photo shows a cowbird chick begging with a bluebird chick. Note the size difference at just a few days old.

nest but 2 were further developed than the others. The 2 advanced birds weren't too far from fledging. After waiting 2 more days I checked the box again and found only the 2 runts left in the box. The adult chickadees hadn't abandoned their young and diligently kept feeding until all were fledged.

One month later while checking my trail at Lake Kegonsa State Park I opened a Peterson box that had a pair of bluebirds nesting. There were 3 nice light blue eggs and incubation was about to start. The next time I checked the box there was a cowbird egg in with the 3 bluebird eggs. Once again I chose not to mess with Mother Nature and let it be. Since cowbirds hatch sooner and take over dominance in the box I decided to monitor this box more often than my once per week routine. The bluebird hen didn't try to remove the egg either. She rotated the eggs and incubated them all. The cowbird chick did hatch a few days earlier as expected and was further developed



than the bluebirds. (see photo) To my surprise the cowbird chick was gone on about the 10th day following hatching. I couldn't see the chick near the box nor did I see any adults around. Had it fledged already? Or did it get ousted by one of the adults because it was too aggressive?

Several days passed. I checked the box again and there were only 2 bluebird chicks left. One had disappeared. All appeared healthy to me on my previous visit. Had the female

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Bluebirds feeding fledged cowbird chick. *Photo by Jack Bartholmai*

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cowbird returned and discovered her chick missing and removed one of the bluebird chicks in retaliation?

The 2 bluebird chicks did eventually fledge from that nest. But a strange thing happened at another nest box 100 yards away. It had 4 healthy bluebird chicks in it and one of them disappeared at about the 7 day old stage. This wasn't a nest box predated by cowbirds but was in the general area of the park where the other box was. Did the cowbird retaliate on this nest for no reason? A lot of questions were coming up and answers were nowhere to be found.

I recall reading an article in a birding magazine a few years back that researchers from Southern Illinois and Florida universities studied cowbirds and their predation on Yellow Warblers. The researchers found that when they removed the cowbird egg from a host nest the hen cowbird was

more likely to return and retaliate against the host species by destroying their eggs or killing their chicks. This is another reason why I didn't remove the squatter's eggs from the 2 nest in my experiences.

Many bluebirders may want to treat cowbirds the same as house sparrows, an alien invasive species bent on harming bluebirds and other cavity nesters. We must remember though that cowbirds are "native" birds and won't completely disrupt the nesting cycle of cavity nesters, as I discovered from my experience. There's probably a good chance that cowbirds won't return and retaliate against the host birds and their young but cavity nesters have to learn to deal with this unusual species on their own without human interference.

I wish all of you happy trails and a wonderful bluebirding season in 2009, hopefully one free of cowbirds.