

Feeding stations: hubs of activity



TIMOTHY NOWICKI

NATURE TRAILS

According to a government survey 84 million people feed birds. If you have a feeder you can understand why so many people feed birds.

They are colorful, they are around all year, they are active, they change color, they bring their young to the feeders. They provide anticipation for those returning in the spring, and they provide excitement when a never-before-seen bird appears.

There are always things going on at a feeding station. In spring the adults take seed from the feeders and feed their mates as part of courtship. In fall they take the seeds and feed their young. But sometimes the young they feed may look different than their own.

My wife called me to the feeders the other day because she saw something strange. A cardinal was feeding a non-descript grayish bird that was definitely not a young cardinal. It turned out to be a young brown-headed cowbird.

Brown-headed cowbirds are known as social parasites. They lay

their eggs in other bird's nests and let the host species care for the young. A cardinal is only one of more than 150 species that have been parasitized by a cowbird.

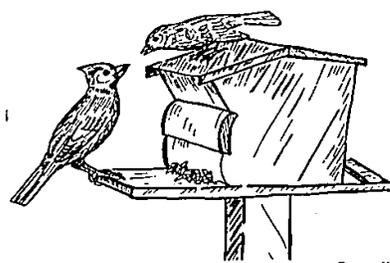
Female cowbirds watch the activities of host species like finches and warblers very carefully. Then in the early morning when the host species is gone, she enters the nest and lays her egg. A single female cowbird may lay 10-12 eggs, some reports say it may be as high as 40.

Many host species do not recognize that it is in the nest. A handful of species like the yellow warbler recognize a cowbird egg and will then build another nest of the original nest in order to avoid incubating the cowbird egg. But most species do not have that capability.

Young cowbirds hatch out earlier than most young of their host. This makes the cowbird bigger and more aggressive in begging for food and ultimately results in the death of the host species young. The cardinal we saw feeding the cowbird accepted it as one of their own.

Watching bird feeders can lead to many interesting observations regarding our feathered friends.

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Meal time: A cardinal feeds a young brown-headed cowbird. Cowbirds lay their eggs in other birds' nests, leaving them in their care.

Porch light campaign aims for fewer homeless animals

The Michigan Humane Society has declared Saturday "Homeless Animals' Day."

The MHS, in conjunction with the International Society for Animal Rights, has asked that animal rights supporters turn on their

porch lights between 9 and 10 p.m. to draw attention to the fact that 17 million cats and dogs are euthanized annually in the United States.

To prevent animals from dying, the MHS suggests that all pet owners have their animal spayed or neutered.

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