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Review of *Cowbirds and Other Brood Parasites* by Catherine P. Ortega

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Cowbirds and Other Brood Parasites. Catherine P. Ortega. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1998. xv+371 pp. Figures, tables, notes, references, index \$65.00 cloth (ISBN 0-8165-1527-1).

Your attitude toward cowbirds and other brood parasites may be largely influenced by the nature of your experience with them. If your primary contact with brood parasites occurs when they appear with the host species you are watching, studying, or researching, it is easy to side with those who have characterized cowbirds as feathered wretches, social outcasts, arch villains, or pests of the highest order. If the focus of your attention is on cowbirds themselves, however, you may be more likely to view them as highly adapted, fascinating components of the ecosystem. If you are not already in the second category, you should be after reading Catherine Ortega's *Cowbirds and Other Brood Parasites*.

The key value of Ortega's book is its careful and precisely written summary of a wealth of new information about cowbirds and other brood parasites that has not been presented in this way since the appearance of Herbert Friedmann's *The Cowbirds: A Study in the Biology of Social Parasitism* in 1929. In addition to summarizing published research, this book may be the most accessible outlet for a great deal of information offered at the 1993 North American Research Workshop on the Ecology and Management of Cowbirds, held in Austin, Texas. Researchers have intensified their study of cowbirds over the past decade as they engaged in considerable

debate about the status of Neotropical migrant birds and the potential impacts of Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) on host populations. Bronzed (*M. aeneus*) and Shiny Cowbirds (*M. bonariensis*) are also receiving more attention from North American ornithologists as they expand their ranges to the north. Ortega is not exaggerating when she states that “in recent years, nearly every issue of every major ornithological journal has contained at least one paper regarding some aspect of brood parasitism.”

Ortega opens with an introduction to the biology of brood parasitism, including conspecific brood parasitism, effects on hosts, generalist versus specialist parasites, and a summary of host defense mechanisms. She covers fascinating aspects of brood parasite evolution, including the “evolutionary arms race”—the debate over whether lack of defense is the result of an evolutionary time lag or physical inability in hosts—and a summary of studies of the systematic history of the six cowbird species. Embedded in the question of the history of cowbird evolution is whether the trend is from generalist to specialist brood parasite or vice versa.

The book's middle chapters are devoted to the six cowbird species. Shiny Cowbird biology may be especially noteworthy since this species, observed as far north as Oklahoma in 1990, may have a greater impact on hosts than the Brown-headed Cowbird. Shiny Cowbirds appear to show a greater incidence of multiple parasitism and dump nesting; they also have a habit of puncturing and ejecting eggs even beyond their own breeding season. It is difficult to forecast the speed and extent of Shiny Cowbird range expansion, and Ortega offers no predictions. The chapter on Brown-headed Cowbirds opens with instructions on identifying the three subspecies and procedures for determining age category. This may be of particular interest since the southwestern subspecies (*M. a. obscurus*) appears to be interbreeding with and expanding into the range of the northwestern subspecies (*M. a. artemisiae*), as Ortega's basic but helpful range maps signify. Ortega summarizes recent research about Brown-headed Cowbird biology—including sex ratio, home range size, activity patterns—and offers a more extensive discussion of both territoriality and mating systems. Where studies yield divergent results (as with sex ratios and mating systems) she provides helpful summary tables. She also summarizes ideas and debates about the functions of song, call, and display behaviors.

Throughout the book Ortega highlights unanswered questions. For example, in her discussion of site fidelity, she raises the issue of how cowbirds avoid inbreeding even though they generally experience no contact with siblings in the nest. She returns to it when she proposes that females may use flight whistle dialects to assess relatedness.

Ortega concludes the book with a well-reasoned discussion of “the management challenge.” Since the primary stimulus for management is concern over Neotropical migrants, the debate over declining host species is crucial. Ortega provides an excellent overview of this debate, forcefully challenging assumptions about behavior and population change of cowbirds and their hosts. She advocates cowbird control only as a stopgap measure in limited cases and repeatedly and convincingly asserts that cowbirds are too often blamed as problems themselves when they are merely symptoms of problems of habitat loss and degradation.

As an update to Friedmann’s 1929 cowbird book, Ortega could have titled hers *Cowbirds: Volume II*. Several publications too recent to be included explicitly quantify the relative impacts of nest parasitism versus predation on host populations. And considering the many outstanding questions in cowbird biology Ortega herself has highlighted, we should not have to wait another seventy years for *Cowbirds: Volume III*. **Paul Porneluzi**, *Division of Science and Mathematics, Central Methodist College, Missouri*.