

THE MONTCLAIR BIRD CLUB

YOUR WEEKLY BIRD 61

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by Ric Cohn

Brown-headed Cowbird



I'm not sure why this brown-headed cowbird chick is out of the nest. Since cowbirds do better with insects, a wood thrush nest was perhaps not the best choice. The chick had been in the nest the day before; I'm not sure if it survived.

I am amazed how brown-headed cowbirds always find their own kind after fledging, and wonder how the species can adapt to changing host behavior. Why doesn't the host species learn to recognize the very different egg or hatchling and ignore or evict it? I heard about a cowbird behavior that explains this— or does it? Sometimes an explanation that feels satisfying doesn't hold up when examined more closely.

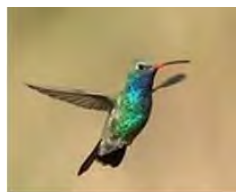
A *Birdnote* podcast on 9/14/24, titled “Cowbird Mafia,” had a very satisfying answer. Some researchers have suggested the hosts sometimes catch on and throw the odd-looking egg out. But when that happens, a cowbird sometimes retaliates by destroying the host’s eggs. These studies claimed to show that the genetic cost to the foster parent of losing all their eggs is higher than the cost of raising one additional (cowbird) chick. Quite the protection racket.



This fledging cowbird was still being fed by its eastern wood-pewee foster parent. The insect diet was clearly agreeing with it.

Here’s the rub. A recent study analyzing twenty-two years of data from a number of studies found this not to be true. To be fair, this study did not show that there are no populations where this “mafia” behavior takes place, but it looks like I (and researchers) will need to keep looking for answers.

If you would like to see your photographs highlighted here, send one or two pictures with a short paragraph to Sandy Sorkin & Rick Wright at MontclairBirdClub100@gmail.com.



Southwest Wings

