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NATURE NOTE

Do Male Cowbirds Scout for Appropriate Hosts' Nests?

In this article I report on observations of ambiguous behaviour of a male Giant Cowbird *Scaphidura oryzivora* and a male Shiny Cowbird *Molothrus bonariensis* on Trinidad, seen in the course of a bird-watching tour for Cheesemans' Ecology Safaris.

On 27 January 1998 an adult male Giant Cowbird was observed at the junction of the Guacharo and Chaconia Trails at the Asa Wright Nature Centre in the Arima valley. It flew into a flowering Mountain Immortelle tree *Erythrina micropteryx*, which was festooned with about 24 nests of the Crested Oropendola *Psarocolius decumanus*. The cowbird was immediately engaged in a physical struggle with a male oropendola. As they grappled and pecked each other, almost falling from the perch, female oropendolas watched from a distance. The cowbird was undeterred by two very aggressive attacks made by the male oropendola, which then gave up the struggle and flew to an outer branch of the tree. He paid no more attention to the Giant Cowbird, which proceeded to take its time examining the interior of four oropendola nests in the colony. The cowbird was seen to fly to a nest, stand erect at the opening for a few seconds, with its iridescent ruff blowing in the breeze, enter the nest and descend immediately to the bottom of the long sock-like structure. The nest bulged and moved actively while the cowbird was in it; then the cowbird emerged, checked his surroundings and flew to another nest. Each examination of a nest lasted no longer than 30 seconds, and nothing was seen to be removed from the nests. There was no evidence that the cowbird consumed oropendola chicks or eggs, but we wondered whether a male cowbird may play a part in choosing suitable host nest sites for its females.

On the following day our group was on the Arima-Blanchisseuse Road about two miles south of the village of Morne La Croix. A pair of Blue Dacnis, *Dacnis cayana* was observed moving about together in a tree overhead. They were followed

everywhere they went by an adult male Shiny Cowbird, which was not begging for food but silently following the tanagers. As with the Giant Cowbird, we wondered if the male cowbird may have been scouting for appropriate host nest sites.

A comment on the above article by Tim Manolis

Actually, searching behaviour by male Shiny Cowbirds that has been construed as searching for hosts' nests has been previously observed by me and others. The relevant passage from my thesis (1982, p.104) is as follows: "Pairs of cowbirds were frequently observed in House Wren territories ... Both male and female cowbirds were often observed walking and peering about under the eaves of houses, sheds, pens, etc. at all rural sites. At Terry Hill on Tobago cowbirds were frequently seen probing with their beaks at the bases of epiphytes on large samaan and other trees (52% of 25 observations of apparent foraging activity). As House Wrens and occasionally other birds construct nests in such sites, this searching behaviour could serve to find both food and host nests. Female cowbirds might accept mate-guarding by males if males helped find nests or flushed out nesting birds while foraging. Such behaviour could account for Young's statement (1929, p. 256) that "the male does most of the work of prospecting for nests, and I have often watched them examining wrens' nests in houses".

REFERENCES

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