

# Illinois Hosts of the Brown-headed Cowbird

By Peter E. Lowther

**B**rown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) are wide-ranging brood parasites of North America. Cowbirds have received much attention because of their breeding biology and interaction with host species. Over 220 species have been reported as being parasitized by the Brown-headed Cowbird, and 144 species are known to have actually reared cowbird young (Friedmann and Kiff 1985, Lowther 1993). Cowbird abundance is greatest in the Great Plains — from Kansas to North Dakota — with high densities also extending eastward through the Midwest (Mayfield 1965, Price et al. 1995). In Illinois, cowbirds are common statewide in the current variety of agricultural habitats including crop fields, meadows, pastures, and woodlots.

In this present account, I provide a list of 73 species (plus 1 more possible) that have been recorded as cowbird victims or hosts in Illinois. The host tabulations of Friedmann (Friedmann 1929, 1963, Friedmann et al. 1977, Friedmann and Kiff 1985) provided my starting point. In addition, I looked through older local and regional journals to find mention of "Illinois" and "cowbird" together. I have also made use of a database of museum egg sets which include cowbird eggs (L. F. Kiff and P. E. Lowther, unpubl.).

*Yellow Warblers are frequent hosts to Brown-headed Cowbird eggs. Drawing of Yellow Warbler feeding a cowbird young by Denis Kania.*

## *Past surveys of cowbird parasitism in Illinois.*

— H. Nehrling (1880-85) presented an account of his bird observations from northern Illinois and listed 16 species as cowbird hosts: Wood Thrush, 4 warblers, 4 vireos, 3 sparrows, 3 flycatchers, and 1 tanager. R. M. Barnes (1890), egg collector and long time editor of *Oologist*, listed 8 cowbird hosts among the breeding birds of Marshall County. Poling (1889) found about 43 nests of 18 species parasitized near Quincy: most common were Eastern Towhee (about 12 nests), Chipping Sparrow (6 nests), and Red-eyed Vireo (4 sets).

Blocher (1936) provided a list of 22 host species; most commonly parasitized were Northern Cardinal (16 of 19 nests parasitized), Wood Thrush ("every set [of an unknown total] parasitized"), Eastern Towhee (only 1 nest not parasitized of unknown total), Field Sparrow (11 of 14 nests), Eastern Phoebe (about half of nests parasitized of unknown total). In his book on Illinois birds, Bohlen (1989) listed 61 host species which seem to have been obtained from the several host compilations of Friedmann (Friedmann 1929, 1963, Friedmann et al. 1977, Friedmann and Kiff 1985).

