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Protected Status of Parasitic Brown Headed Cowbirds

The Problem:

Brown Headed Cowbirds currently remain protected under federal laws governing songbirds. Unfortunately songbird nest parasitism caused by cowbirds is believed a major factor in declining migratory songbird populations in much of the United States. Brown headed cowbirds, sometimes referred to as the "buffalo bird," are believed to have evolved aside vast herds of American bison by taking advantage of insects stirred by the grazing animals. Being unable to build or care for nests while moving with wandering herds, cowbirds learned to deposit their eggs in nests of other birds. Cowbird chicks hatch earlier and are larger than most songbirds. Cowbird nest mates usually parish as they are out-competed for food delivered by overstressed parent birds. A single female cowbird will typically parasitize several songbird nests as they distribute multiple eggs. Cowbirds are known to have parasitized species from hummingbirds to wood ducks, but native sparrows and warblers serve as the most typical host.

Cowbirds thrive amongst edge habitats with open areas which have greatly increased due to post European settlement land use practices. Cowbirds do not need bison or cattle populations to thrive. One cowbird study in Texas showed a 90% nesting failure of other native songbirds due to cowbird parasitism. But six years after a cowbird trapping effort began the nest parasitism dropped to 10%.

In some other states, Texas being the best example, the USFWS has allowed permits for trapping cowbirds to land owners and conservation groups. Under the Texas example, trapping permits were issued by the Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept only after interested individuals would attend training. Training covered methods of cowbird trapping and timing; trap building plans; correct identification; and release of non-target species; and record keeping. Training was also conducted by the TPWD. In some states NRCS funding has been available to participating landowners for the building of cowbird traps. The traps are large and expensive. Not every bird watcher has the proper area and ability to trap cowbirds, though perhaps most would support such an idea? Such a plan could provide benefit to Wisconsin's migratory songbirds and allow some interested citizens to enjoy and assist with benefiting our wildlife.

> Would you support a collaborative effort between the WDNR and the USFWS and NRCS so as to allow individuals and conservation groups to engage in control activities of parasitic cowbirds?

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