

## Activity #4: *The Tale of Chipilo* The Brown-headed Cowbird

Read the following information and then answer the questions that follow.

### Cowbird Description

The Brown-headed Cowbird is a member of the blackbird family. The adult male is easily identified by his brown head and metallic green-black body. Female cowbirds are a pale brown with a gray-brown head. Both males and females are about 7<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches long. Cowbirds are called **brood parasites** because they lay their eggs in the nests of other birds and do not care for their own young. Their parasitic reproductive strategy is unique among the world's blackbird species. Today, Brown-headed Cowbirds occur throughout the United States.

Cowbirds evolved to follow herds of grazing animals, often covering many miles in a day. They can little afford the time to build their own nests, lay and incubate eggs, and care for young. Instead, the female cowbird finds the nest of another bird, lays an egg in it, and leaves. The female cowbird may do this an average of up to 40 times per breeding season. The female cowbird may remove or destroy some or all of the eggs or nestlings of the host birds.

The **host** birds, usually songbirds, raise the cowbird young as their own. Cowbird eggs hatch sooner than host eggs and the young grow faster than host young, so they get most of the food and have been known to push the host's young completely out of the nest. The majority of the time the adult host

birds end up feeding and caring for only the cowbird young, rather than raising the next generation of their own kind.

### Declining Songbird Populations

Throughout North America songbird numbers are declining. While there is no single reason for this decline, one major contributing factor is the spread of cowbirds due to landscape changes throughout North America.

Cowbirds once occurred only in short-grass prairies, where they followed bison herds, feeding on insects stirred up by the grazing animals. Human-caused changes to the environment, including the introduction of domesticated grazing animals and cultivated fields and lawns, have greatly benefited the cowbird, helping it to spread to new areas and prey on more songbird species. Today the cowbird parasitizes more than 225 species of North American birds. The cowbird may pose a particular danger to already-threatened species like the Black-capped Vireo. Studies have shown that the removal of one female cowbird enhances the survival of 35 songbirds per year.

*written by Texas Parks & Wildlife Department:*  
<http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/huntwild/wild/nuisance/cowbirds/>

## Brown-headed Cowbird Questions

- 1) How does a female Brown-headed Cowbird differ from a male Brown-headed Cowbird?
  - A) females are larger than males
  - B) males don't care for their young
  - C) females are lighter in color than males
  - D) females are smaller than males
  
- 2) Brown-headed Cowbirds are often called **brood parasites** because:
  - A) they only care for their own young
  - B) they let other birds raise their young
  - C) they sit on other birds' nests
  - D) they occur throughout the United States
  
- 3) Why did Brown-headed Cowbirds evolve to not take care of their young?
  - A) they followed herds of animals and there was no time to sit on nests and raise young
  - B) they lay so many eggs they could not keep up with raising all their young
  - C) cowbird eggs hatch before host eggs and their young grow faster than host young
  - D) other birds evolved to be better parents
  
- 4) The word **host** in paragraph three most likely means:
  - A) a thin piece of bread
  - B) when one bird lets another bird raise their young
  - C) when one bird raises the young of another bird
  - D) a particular kind of songbird
  
- 5) Young cowbirds have an advantage over host young in a nest because:
  - A) the other young hatch more quickly but don't grow as quickly
  - B) the cowbird eggs hatch before host eggs and cowbird young grow more quickly than host young
  - C) the host bird prefers the cowbird young over its own young
  - D) the eggs of both birds hatch at the same time

- 6) What human-caused changes benefit the cowbird?
- A) domesticated animals and cultivated fields and lawns
  - B) shopping malls
  - C) pesticides and irrigation
  - D) cowbirds threaten many bird species
- 7) You can tell from this article that the author thinks:
- A) cowbirds are beautiful birds in need of protection
  - B) cowbirds are declining in population
  - C) cowbirds are a threat to many songbirds
  - D) cowbirds are bad birds

## Answer Key Activity #4: *The Tale of Chipilo*–The Brown-headed Cowbird

- 1) C
- 2) B
- 3) A
- 4) C
- 5) B
- 6) A
- 7) C

### **Alignment:**

Grade 3 (red)

Grade 4 (blue)

Grade 5 (green)

Grade 6 (purple)

English Language Arts & Reading student expectations: 1(A-E), 2(A-C), 4(A,B), 11, 12; 1, 2(A,B), 9, 10; 1, 2(A,B), 9, 10; 1, 2(A,B), 9

Mathematics student expectations: 11(A)

Science student expectations: 7(C), 9(A,B); 7(C), 9(A); 7(B), 9(A-D); 10(C), 12(E,F)

Social studies student expectations: 4(A,D), 17(C); 7(B), 9(C), 21(A-D), 22(A); 7(B), 24(A-D), 25(A); 3(A), 4(D), 21(A-D), 22(A)