

PINE SISKIN FEEDING TWO FLEDGLING BROWN-HEADED COWBIRDS

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Buried among letters and other notes received since my high school days from the late Robert (Bob) W. Nero, is an observation of probable brood parasitism by the Brown-headed Cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) on the Pine Siskin (*Spinus pinus*). Nero sent the following observations to me on 4 July 1995, stating, “If you can make use of the following information, feel free to do so...”

June 29/95: A male (by size) juvenile cowbird in our feeder at noon. Ruth [Nero's wife] called me to identify the bird. It begs to and is fed by a Pine Siskin... then the cowbird threatens (?) and evicts two House Sparrows [*Passer domesticus*]. Cowbird leaves, Siskin leaves, then 5 minutes later a female (by size) cowbird appears with the male cowbird... both feeding on the ground beneath the feeder. A moment later, when a Siskin lands on a branch 5 feet overhead, both cowbirds at once fly up to the twig, one on each side of the Siskin, and both beg at close range. Both cowbirds well feathered, feeding selves, but responsive to Siskin.

July 3/95: At 4:35 p.m. the female cowbird is fed by a Pine Siskin on the feeder.

Nero's observations suggest but do not confirm this as a record of Brown-headed Cowbird parasitism on the Pine Siskin. Although reported infrequently, more than one possible host species have been observed feeding the same nestling or fledged cowbirds, and other brood parasites.¹ However, the facts that only a Pine Siskin(s) was observed feeding the cowbirds in this case, despite the short period of observation, and that one of the cowbirds behaved aggressively toward another possible but infrequently recorded host species, the House Sparrow, favours the conclusion that the

Pine Siskins reared the cowbirds.

Only cowbirds fledged from the siskin's nest, assuming that no siskins were being fed out of Nero's sight. The literature is replete with observations of only cowbirds being fed out of the hosts' nests, including other observations involving the Pine Siskin, which suggests if hosts' young did leave the nest, they soon died.² Pine Siskin has been reported infrequently as a host of the Brown-headed Cowbird³, but in a study in Kansas, up to 28 of 51 nests (55 per cent) were parasitized.⁴ In that study, and others, most cowbird nestlings died within a few days, with only a few surviving long enough to leave the nest.⁴⁻⁶ The similarly low survival of cowbirds reported in nests of the congeneric American Goldfinch (*S. tristis*) has been suggested to be due to dietary inadequacy.⁷ These observations reveal that both species of finch are unproductive hosts of the Brown-headed Cowbird.

The only published record of parasitism on the Pine Siskin in Manitoba was of a cowbird being fed out of the nest in Winnipeg, in June 1993.⁸ The Prairie Nest Records Scheme (PNRS) contains an earlier report of a nest in Winnipeg with two siskin eggs plus one cowbird egg that the observer removed on 27 May 1974. This record is presumably the one to which Friedmann and colleagues referred.⁹ Despite the abrupt reduction in clutch volume following removal of the cowbird egg, the nest remained active and two siskins left the nest “when viewed” on 11 June. Pine Siskin has been reported once as a cowbird host in Saskatchewan.¹⁰ Details in the PNRS revealed that nest, near Turtle Lake, contained one siskin egg on 5 July 1992, but by 7 July the nest, now with one egg of host and cowbird, was abandoned, but not before the siskin had begun to build over the cowbird egg and both eggs had been punctured “by squirrels”. In actuality, the eggs were probably

punctured by a cowbird.¹¹

Years earlier, Nero recorded Brown-headed Cowbird parasitism on another infrequently reported host, the Baltimore Oriole (*Icterus galbula*). His first observation was of an oriole that attempted, without success, to feed an earthworm to a young cowbird, on a road in Wisconsin.¹² In Manitoba, he examined a deserted Baltimore Oriole nest that contained two unincubated cowbird eggs, which he speculated had been laid before any oriole eggs were laid, thus, possibly being the cause of desertion.¹³ Nero's observations predated results of experiments that simulated natural parasitism on the Baltimore Oriole that revealed ejection of cowbird eggs usually within minutes of laying¹⁴, when oriole eggs were present for comparison.¹⁵

Acknowledgements

These observations, which Bob Nero sent to me long ago, should have been reported at the time instead of becoming buried in my files. Nero's keen eye for all things in the natural world was well known to readers through his extensive writings and poems, and it was revealed again in his recognition of the significance of cowbird parasitism on the Pine Siskin and other infrequently reported host species. I thank Andrea Benville, Ryan Fisher and Randall Mooi for uncovering records of parasitism on Pine Siskin filed in the Prairie Nest Records Scheme.

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Spencer Sealy was among several budding ornithologists fortunate to have come under Bob Nero's mentorship during their high school years in Saskatchewan. As Spencer progressed through university, Bob lent his wisdom and keen editorial eyes to many articles Spencer prepared for Blue Jay. Both Bob and Spencer eventually moved to Manitoba and — although they pursued different paths — in the ensuing years, they continued to talk about the Great Gray Owls banded, and the nests observed, years earlier. 🦉

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