



Branching Out

Summer 2015

DECLINE OF THE SONGBIRDS

In Huron Woods, our mornings are filled with vibrant diverse birdsong, due mainly to the conservation of our lush native biodiverse ground cover, understory and canopy of plants. We enjoy so many species of birds, nesting and migrating through our woods, it is difficult to understand why populations of these endearing creatures are declining in North America. But the dangers are many, topped by habitat loss.

PARASITES- The Cowbird

- brown-headed cowbirds do not build nests for their eggs but lay them in the nests of other bird “hosts” to incubate and feed the chicks for them
- the female cowbird generally removes one of the host eggs from the nest to make room for an egg of her own
- robins, blue jays, catbirds and Brown Thrashers reject cowbird eggs and pitch them from their nests
- unfortunately, **phoebes**, **song sparrows**, **vireos** and many **warblers** accept them, incubate and feed the usurpers at the expense of their own chicks
- cowbirds are not effective when large expanses of dense forest provide nesting sites for songbirds
- however, when the forests are cleared, cowbirds, preferring forest edges, are free to parasitize large numbers of songbirds
- cowbirds, named for following bison, then cows, were once confined to limited forest edges, now enjoy a huge range from east to west coasts of North America and fly south to Mexico for winter
- sometimes, when bird hosts or well meaning humans eject cowbird eggs from their nests, a “mafia hit” results; cowbirds destroy the host nest and chicks with it, forcing victims to build a new nest, thus creating a new opportunity for the cowbird to parasitize once more.
- When farms along the eastern seaboard were abandoned and thick forest regrew, cowbirds lost their opportunity to parasitize songbirds in that area.
- While survival rate is only about 3%, each female cowbird lays 40 eggs per year so the toll on songbird hosts is heavy
- cowbird numbers are rising, songbird numbers are declining

Brown-headed Cowbird



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A NOVEL STRATEGY

In 2010, in HW, a cowbird laid one egg in a phoebe nest, discovered before the hosts laid her own eggs. The phoebe simply built another nest atop the old one, sealing in the cowbird egg to await its fate. The cowbird chick hatched, but without food, died, still inside the lower storey of the nest. Small revenge however, since cowbirds parasitized 144 of the 220 songbird nests studied.

The Lambton Shores Trail Network creates reforested corridors between forest fragments to reconnect these pathways for wildlife. Contact klauskgb@gmail.com to help out.

Sources: Silence of the Songbirds by Bridget Stutchbury, The Birder's Handbook by Ehrlich, Dobkin and Wheye and National Geographic Bird Identifier website

PREDATORS

Blue Jay

- ~aggressive attacks on smaller songbirds
- ~in spring, robs nests of other birds to eat eggs and their young
- ~destruction and fragmentation of forests gives jays increased access to the nests of vulnerable songbirds



Raccoons, chipmunks, skunks, opossums, squirrels and snakes consume eggs, particularly at forest edges.



Kitty looks innocent but...

- ~even well fed, declawed, cats catch and kill adult birds
- ~ estimates of 75 million cats in the US mean huge losses of birds each year
- ~keeping cats indoors in spring and fall reduces losses dramatically



- American Crows**~ one of the cleverest of birds, can solve complex problems
- ~drop mollusks to crack shells
 - ~eat eggs and nestlings of songbirds
 - ~mobbing behaviour to defend nests can involve dozens of parent crows
 - ~ hundreds to thousands can gather to form winter roosts

PHYSICAL HAZARDS

Sky Scrapers, lit at night, contribute to huge losses

-birds, migrating at night, suffer high casualties when they crash into sky scrapers, microwave and radio towers, wind turbines

~ confusion results when buildings are lit at night, blinding them and interfering with sight of the stars which guide them on their migration

~reflections on glass cause many window collisions



Please join us to expand your knowledge of nature at one of our **guest speaker** events:

July 11 at 7:30 a.m. meet at the fire road , Melissa Prout “**Walk on the Wild Side**” Birdwatching 101

July 31 at 7 p.m. at the clubhouse- Brian Salt- “**Bird Rehabilitation**” -come see live bird ambassadors

September 4 at 7 p.m.at the clubhouse- Paul Nicholson, London Free Press bird columnist- “**Fall Migrations**”