

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD MOVEMENTS ACROSS THE GULF OF MEXICO

Chris Dorgan and Robert A. Duncan

On 13 May 1997, Dorgan observed large numbers of neotropical migrants landing aboard the M. V. Lauren E., an oil rig service vessel located 131 nautical miles (243 km) south of Cameron, LA. A Cave Swallow (*Hirundo fulva*), Swainson's Thrush (*Catharus ustulatus*), Gray-cheeked Thrush (*Catharus minimus*), seventeen species of warblers (*parulidae*), Indigo Buntings (*Passerina cyanea*), a Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni*), four Yellow-headed Blackbirds (*Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*), and a Baltimore Oriole (*Icterus galbula*) were some of the species noted as they rested and fed on fruit provided by Dorgan. Some species lingered for a considerable period of time but most flew off at dusk. Among the species observed were a mixed flock of fifteen male and female Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*).

There is little published information on the movements of Brown-headed Cowbirds over the Gulf of Mexico. The species is a widespread breeder throughout the continental United States and Canada, breeding as far south in Mexico to northern Baja California, Guerrero, Michoacan, Ganajuato, San Luis Potosi, and northern Tamaulipas. It winters as far south as southern Baja California, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and Veracruz (AOU 1983).

Dr. Henry M. Stevenson's study of routes taken by neotropical migrants (Stevenson 1957), based on direct observation, comparative

abundance and the sequence of spring arrival dates, did not consider this species a trans-Gulf migrant as it is not listed among the species studied.

Only two casualties in March, four in April and none in May of this species were recorded during Crawford's (1981) twenty-five year study of migrants hitting the WCTV tower located in the Tallahassee, FL. area. However, 58 were recorded in January and 17 in February. These figures are somewhat mitigated by the fact that a large winter blackbird roost is located in the area (Stevenson & Anderson 1994) and may have been the result of local movements.

There are two other instances known to the authors of Brown-headed Cowbirds moving far out over open water: a bird seen by Paul Romaine 124 mi. (174 km) off Cap Canaveral, FL. On 25 February 1959; and another seen by Bruce Neville et. al., 17 November 1991, 15 mi. (21km) south of Carrabelle, Franklin Co., FL. (Stevenson & Anderson 1994). Stevenson considered both of these occurrences as migrant birds.

Dorgan's observation of fifteen birds so far out in the Gulf adds further credence to Stevenson's suggestion that the species may be a migrant. The lack of spring tower casualties at the WCTV tower may indicate a movement across the western Gulf in spring. That the Brown-headed Cowbird can be found so far offshore should come as a surprise to many observers. **Chris Dorgan**, 15225 River Park Rd., Fairhope, AL 36532 and **Robert A. Duncan**, 614 Fairpoint Dr., Gulf Breeze, FL. 32561.

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