Egg-destroying Behavior by Brown-headed Cowbirds: Implications for Management and Conservation[TWS]

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Most interspecific obligate brood parasites, including brown-headed cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*), destroy or remove eggs from host nests, sometimes causing the host nests to fail. This behavior is extremely variable, however, as cowbirds may destroy none, one, several, or all of the eggs in a host nest. Although this behavior seems to be an integral part of the brood parasitic syndrome, the cues that influence egg destruction behavior are poorly understood. Experiments with free-ranging, territorial female cowbirds near Missoula, Montana, showed that their behavioral responses were influenced by both the number and types of eggs in experimental nests. Females destroyed few eggs in experimental nests containing two host eggs. In contrast, they destroyed most eggs in two-egg clutches if one was a strange cowbird egg, or in clutches containing four white host eggs. This behavioral flexibility likely allows parasites to increase their chances of successful parasitism. The management and conservation implications of egg-destroying behavior and variation in spatial ranging patterns of female cowbirds is discussed.