THE BACKYARD
WILDBIRD & NATURE STORE
ENJOYING NATURE IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD™

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD

BY COLIN

Have you ever wondered why that little junco is feeding that giant baby bird? They don't *shrink* as they age, do they? Chances are the baby is actually a cowbird, snuck into the nest by its birth parent.

There are two species of cowbirds found in North America; the Brown-headed and the Bronzed. Bronzed Cowbirds can be found in a small region of arid, dry desert in the United States, and into Mexico, while the Brown-headed Cowbird is common throughout most of North America. A Brown-headed Cowbird can be identified by its call; a high pitched, squeaky whistle.

Male cowbirds have a black body with a bit of sheen to it and a brown head. The female is dusty brown with no distinguishable markings. Their bill is conical, like that of a finch, and dark in colour. Cowbirds are about 8" in size; a little smaller than a robin but bigger than a sparrow. They do visit backyard feeders and at my feeder they usually go for the white millet and hulled sunflower seeds.

Unlike most birds, cowbirds don't build a nest for their eggs. Instead cowbirds are considered a *parasitic* bird, who lays their eggs in other birds' nests and leave the raising of their young to the host parents.

A female cowbird will lay up to 40 eggs a year, of which only 3% or so survive to adulthood. Most birds only lay 10 to 12 eggs a year, but they do have to raise their own children. Female cowbirds usually lay their eggs in a host nest during the nest construction, just after the host eggs are laid.


R. Hocken

If there's more than one egg in the host nest, the cowbird will remove one and replace it with hers. If there's only one, she adds hers and leaves the original alone to keep the parent from abandoning the nest.

Flycatchers, vireos, warblers, and Song Sparrows are common host parents for the Brown-headed Cowbird.

Not all birds are viable hosts for the cowbird eggs. American Robins and Blue Jays are among those that are able to notice the intruder. They will remove the egg, destroy it, build a new nest on top of it, or abandon the nest site altogether and start over.

American Goldfinch also don't make a good host family, due to their diet. Young cowbirds aren't able to survive on the vegetarian-heavy meals of the goldfinch, and rarely make it through infancy.

When the cowbird egg successfully hatches, the young chick is usually larger than the host chicks and gets most of the food, growing faster than the other chicks and taking over the nest. It's exhausting work for the host parents to feed the young cowbird as it fledges and requires more food.

The Black-headed Grosbeak

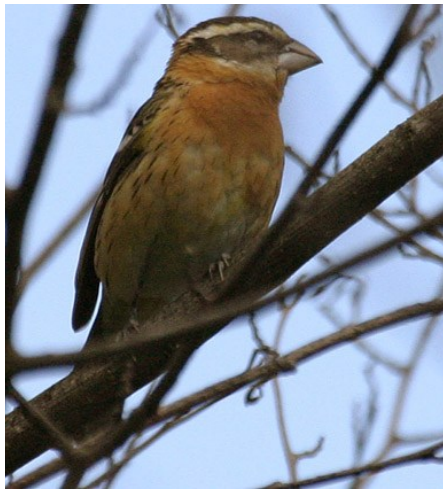
Male (left) and Female (right)

Black-headed Grosbeak (Male)
—R. Hocken

The Black-headed Grosbeak is a hefty songbird with a thick, conical bill. They have a large head paired with a short, thick neck and short tail. Males are cinnamon-orange overall with a black head and black and white wings. Male Grosbeaks get their adult plumage around 2 years old.

The female Black-headed Grosbkeak looks similar to the juvenile with her brown back and head paired with an orange or buffy chest. They also have a buff streak above their eye, and sometimes have streaks on the sides of their breast.

Both male and female Black-headed Grosbeaks share the responsibilities of raising the young, from incubating eggs to feeding the nestlings once hatched.



Black-headed Grosbkeak (Female)
—R. Hocken

J. Morrison

Bird Waterer

Nowhere to put a bird bath?

Attract a variety of birds for a drink with a 16oz. capacity waterer.

Gives bird safe, secure access to drinking water.

$37.99 ea.

Hummingbird Baths

by Kelsey

Are you ever curious about how you can spot tons of birds in your bird bath, but there's never any hummingbirds splashing around? Do they just not bathe at all?

Don't worry, they do! Bathing just looks different for hummingbirds.

Hummingbirds have very weak legs and are barely capable of walking, meaning that unlike other birds who will wade into bird baths, they basically have to land directly where they want to go.

This can be an issue for bird baths that are too deep for them to stand in, or where the depth is unclear. Even shallow bird baths can be hard for any birds to actually tell the depths of, so for the hummingbirds who can't wade in they usually just avoid them altogether.

What they do enjoy, however, is rain or rain-like water features. Hummingbirds will hover or perch in an area sprinkled with water droplets and mist, using the rainfall to bathe. They'll then move to a perch, where they'll preen their feathers and dry off a bit.

They have also been known, on occasion, to perch on fountains or bubblers, right up against the spray where it sticks out of the water, and let the water run down their backs.

What you can do for them is add a high, misty spray. Fountains that spray up into the air, misters hooked onto branches, or even your garden hose on the mist setting are excellent ways to give hummingbirds safe access to a bath.

D. Veljacic

If you don't have a way to add a misty spray, grab a shallow dish and fill it with rocks and water, letting the rocks stick out a bit to create safe perches for hummingbirds.

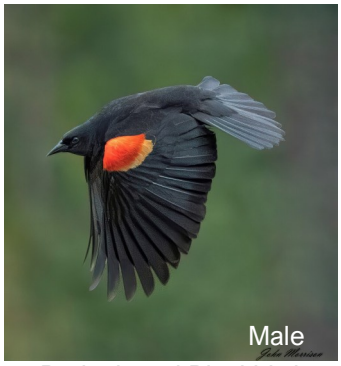
You can also stand in your yard with your hose on mist, and hope you get lucky!

Studying Female Birds

BY KELSEY

While watching songbirds, what do you notice? What helps you identify the birds you're seeing, or at least gives you a good place to start?

If your answer includes colouration and field markings, you're not alone. Most people utilize a mix of behaviours, plumage colouration, and identifiable field markings to determine what birds they're looking at.



Red-winged Blackbirds
—J. Morrison

What this means is that often, when identifying birds, the males are in the spotlight. Male birds tend to be brighter in colour, with more eye-catching behaviours that make them easier and quicker to identify.

Female birds, in comparison, are often duller in colour with more muted behavioural patterns. They're harder to spot in their environment and are less likely to draw your eye even as they move about.

If you see a feeder, or a tree, full of birds and some of them are a brilliant yellow, others have a bright red head, and a few are a dull, streaky brown, who are you going to pay the most attention to? Probably the colourful pretty ones!

Look at the Red-winged Blackbird. Males are black with red and yellow patches on their shoulder, visible in flight. Females, in comparison, are a heavily streaked brown and lack their namesake shoulder patches. If you saw a female by herself, would you be able to identify her species as she flit around? Would you be interested enough to try, when her colouration is so *blah*?

An added challenge when trying to identify female birds is just how similar their plumages can look. Take the House Finch and Purple Finch. The males can be hard enough to tell apart, but the females are even worse. Both are a dull, streaky brown with the main differences being the white eyebrow of the female Purple Finch, and the blurrier streaking on the House Finch. Trying to decipher these small, nearly invisible differences can be difficult when the bird is free to leave whenever she feels like it.

Instead of trying to figure out her species based on her colours and behaviours, a common trick is to watch who she hangs around with and ID her based on that. One streaky brown bird on a feeder next to an obvious House Finch? Well, that'll be the female House Finch then!

The differences between the sexes has an impact not just on watching and identifying birds as a hobby, but also on studying them. Most studies lean towards focussing on species overall, and can gloss over or miss the differences within a species.

Not only are males easier to spot and study, but plenty of studies take place during the breeding season, when females are more likely to be sitting on eggs or young, and less likely to be out and about for studying. This results in skewed data that gives us plenty of insight into the males' behaviours and needs, and less so the females'.

Sex-based differences in habitat use were reported in 33% of studied species, but in an assessment of 66 avian conservation plans only 8% considered the sexes separately. Now, what does this mean?

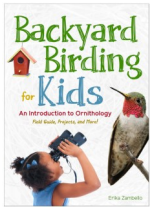
The understudied female birds have historically been considered similar enough to their male counterparts that individual study isn't required. Female birds are thought to require the same food sources, habitat, and considerations as the males, which isn't always true. By failing to recognize the differences in their needs, conservation efforts will be less effective, female bird populations can suffer, and the whole species could be at risk.

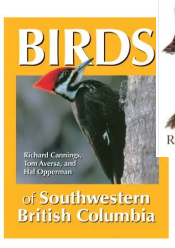
Studying both male and female birds together and independently can give us more detailed information on their survival rates, social roles, and habitat. These studies could have a huge positive impact on conservation efforts.

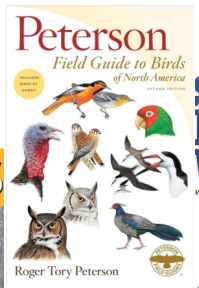
References
- birdnote.org/podcasts/bring-birds-back/forgotten-flock-female-birds
- audubon.org/magazine/when-female-birds-are-overlooked-conservation-suffers
- nwf.org/Home/Magazines/National-Wildlife/2024/Spring/Animals/Female-Birds-Gender-Bias
- audubon.org/magazine/i-became-better-birder-when-i-stopped-focusing-males
- nationalgeographic.com/animals/article/female-bird-research-sex-bias
- scientificamerican.com/article/why-it-took-so-long-to-appreciate-female-birds-songs/
- onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/ibi.13386

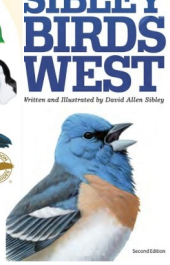
Bird Identification Books

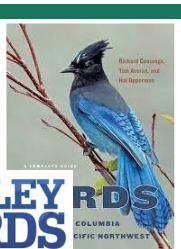
Interested in learning more about how to identify local birds? Check out our array of bird identification guides.











Did you know?

Some adult birds have no discernable plumage differences between sexes, and it can take genetic testing to determine if they're male or female.


R. Hocken

Backyard Nesting

BY COLIN

Distinguishing Juveniles

Juveniles can be identified from their adult counterparts in a few ways.

The first one is plumage. A lot of young birds have different plumage than the adults of their species. For example, juvenile Anna's hummingbirds will look like the adult female, but with no iridescent throat patch, and young Dark-eyed Juncos are streaky and lack the dark head of their parents. On the other hand, some birds like juvenile chickadees look exactly like the adults.

Young birds can also be told apart by their behaviours. They may be uncertain around feeders, unsteady on perches, or let you get closer than the adults would.


R. Hocken

They are also often spotted sitting near food sources, or near adults, chirping with their beaks open and wings aflutter, begging for food, only to stop and eat on their own once the parent flies away.

When juveniles first fledge the nest, they may run around on the ground for a few days before taking off flying, so make sure to be careful when outside.

Summer is here and it's a great time of the year for backyard feeders as the first broods of young birds are out and about. It's the perfect time to enjoy their antics as they beg for food and follow the adults around, mimicking their behaviour without quite knowing why. Plus, there's always the first steps towards learning how to fly!

With all the young birds out and about in backyards, you may notice that sometimes you spot one that seems to be completely alone. Our first instinct is to scoop the juvenile up and look after it, but that's usually not necessary.

The bird may seem alone, but chances are there's an adult nearby keeping an eye on it. Removing the juvenile can create unnecessary problems, and it's better to just observe and keep an eye out for dangers like predators.

If a nestling, meaning a baby with little to no feathers, has fallen from its nest and you know where that nest is, simply place the bird back in its nest. This will not harm the bird and the adults will continue to feed and care for it, unlike what we have been told in the past.

The myth is if you touch a bird the adults will smell you on them, and abandon their young. The problem with this is songbirds have a limited sense of smell, and I think this myth came about just to keep people from playing with a birds nest.

If a bird is injured it's best to first check with local veterinarians or wildlife rehabilitators for advice and assistance. I have seen injured birds adapted to their injury and continue on with their life.

The best things we can do to help the young birds and all the other birds in the backyard, is to provide them with a safe feeding environment, keep the feeders clean and topped up and to provide a water supply, as it can be hard to find for the birds during these hot summer days. Then it is just a matter of sitting back and enjoying the nature in your backyard.


R. Hocken

Thar's Gold in Them There Flowers

BY DAVE

With the summer heat coming, I'm getting excited about seeing living jewels visit my flowers. While many folks plan their pollinator gardens to appeal mainly to bees, there's more pollinators that will meet your eye—or eyes, if you have two of em—once the flowers are popping.

For example, beetles!

I'm not talking about those cute, wee, aphid chomping Lady Beetles we all know and love; I'm talking about shiny, two-centimeter long gems that look like they've been doused in glitter.

Adult Golden Buprestid, or *Buprestis aurulenta*, and Yellow Velvet Beetles (*Lepturobosca chrysocoma*) both feed on nectar and, in the process, transfer pollen between flowers.

Golden Buprestid beetles are around 2cm in size, and roughly oval in shape. They're a shimmery green with yellow highlights, and have burgundy outlined, ridged *elytra*, which are the hardened forewings of beetles, and some true bugs. They're a fairly mediocre pollinator, but beautiful if spotted in your garden.


D. Veljacic

Yellow Velvet beetles are around the same size, shiny yellow in colour, and fuzzy. Their fuzziness makes them a top tier pollinator, as the pollen is accidentally collected in their fuzz and spread widely as they feed.


D. Veljacic

Though the adults enjoy flower nectar, the larvae of both beetle species eat exclusively dead wood.

Golden Buprestid larvae prefer feeding on dead fir, pine, and hemlock trees. Yellow Velvet young enjoy spruce and poplar. You can add logs of their preferred species to your garden area in order to increase your chances of having some of these colourful garden denizens as permanent residents, all summer long.

Nectar-producing plants that attract these beetles include:


Nootka Rose—Flickr


Butterfly Bush—Flickr


Raspberries—Flickr


Canada Thistle —Flickr

Bird Walks

Bird walks are on Sundays (Nanaimo) and Tuesdays (Parksville). Locations and cancellations are posted to thebirdstore.blogspot.com. **All bird walks are weather permitting and cancellations are posted to our blog by the morning of around 8:00 a.m.**

The Sunday Bird Walk leaves The Backyard at 9 a.m. on Sunday mornings, or meets on location at 9:15 a.m.

The Parksville/Qualicum Beach Tuesday Bird Walk meet up location is the Parksville Tourist Information Center parking lot by Highway 19, Northwest Bay Rd. and Franklin's Gull Rd. in Parksville, also at 9 a.m., or on location at 9:15 a.m.

Bird Walks are not held during the summer months (July & August) but resume in early September. There is no charge for our bird walks, and they are designed to conclude before lunch (average approximately 2 hours).

We decide on the location of each bird walk the week before the scheduled bird walk outing. During the week we compile information about what birds are being seen and examine the weather forecast to ensure the walk is scheduled for the most productive location.

All experience levels welcome. Bring your own binoculars when possible for the best experience.

Check out our **online map** for common bird walk locations around Nanaimo and Parksville.

Bird Sightings

Report bird sightings by emailing birding@thebackyard.ca or calling 250-390-3669

May 4th
MacGillivray's Warbler at Lantzville Woodlot North.
Hammond's Flycatcher, Wilson's Warbler, & Orange-crowned Warbler at Copley Trail, beyond the woodlot.

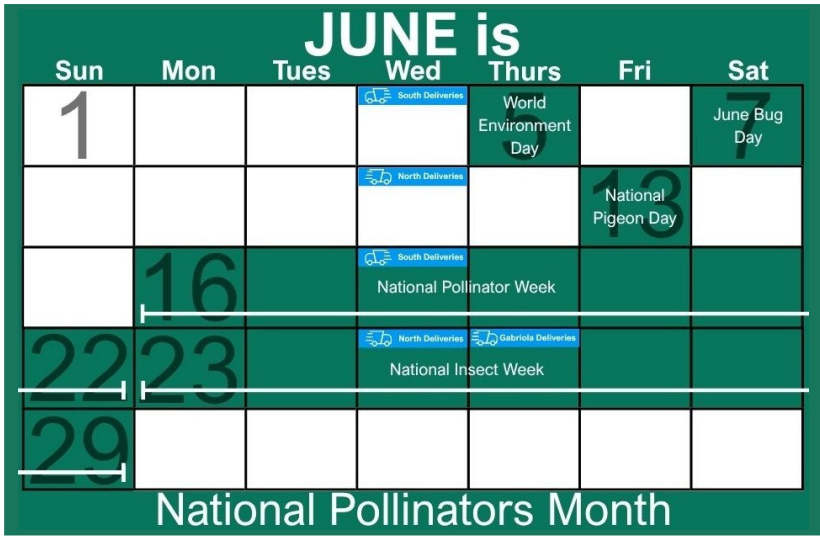
May 10th
Black-headed Grosbeak at Willow Park, by Morrell.

May 17th
4 Western Tanagers at Crystal Place, by Country Club.

May 20th
Swainsons Thrush at Willow Park, by Morrell.

Delivery Schedule for June

North Nanaimo to the Comox Valley
June 11th and **June 25th**
South Nanaimo to Duncan
June 4th and **June 18th**



Hours of Operation

Monday-Saturday 9:30-5:30
Sunday 12:00-4:30

Upcoming Holiday Hours

July 1st, Canada Day: CLOSED

Local Field Naturalist Groups

Nature Nanaimo | Arrowsmith Naturalists | Comox Valley Nature | Cowichan Valley Naturalist Society | Malaspina Naturalists | Rocky Point Bird Observatory | Saltspring Trail & Nature Club | Victoria Natural History Society | Yellowpoint Ecological Society

Contact Us

6314 Metral Drive, Nanaimo, BC
250-390-3669
Toll Free 1-888-808-BIRD [2473]
info@thebackyard.ca
thebackyard.ca
thebirdstore.blogspot.com

Follow Us: @TheBackyardWildbirdStore
@thebirdstore_nanaimo