

Molothrus oryzivorus (Giant Cowbird)

Family: Icteridae (New World Blackbirds)

Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Giant cowbird, *Molothrus oryzivorus*.

[http://antpitta.com/images/photos/icterids/gallery_icterids2.htm, downloaded 10 November 2016]

TRAITS. The Giant Cowbird, *Molothrus oryzivorus*, is one of the larger species in the family Icteridae; their length ranges from 28-36cm and their pointed wings are 15-21cm long when fully extended. The males weigh approximately 180g and the females 135g. The lack of a neck ruff in females make their heads appear smaller than in males. The juvenile cow bird is black with no iridescence; as the bird grows older the iridescence slowly develop, and the adults have glossy iridescent black feathers, especially the males. According to Athanas and Greenfield (2016) the giant cowbird is also easily identified by its red or yellow iris (Fig. 1).

ECOLOGY. Jaramillo and Burke (1999) state that there are two subspecies of the giant cowbird, *M. o. oryzivora* can be found in South America, northerly into Panama as well as on Trinidad. The other subspecies, *M. o. impacifica* occurs in west Panama and Mexico (Jaramillo and Burke, 1999). Giant cowbirds usually forage in small groups with a maximum of a dozen birds. They have also been known to forage with groove-billed anis and bronzed cowbirds in Costa Rica. The giant cowbird can be found in semi-open areas such as open forests with scattered trees, dwelling mainly near forest edges. Foraging also takes place on cultivated lands so they are also often found in such areas.

FORAGING BEHAVIOUR. Giant cowbirds feed mainly on insects and seeds. The bird is also known to obtain food (ticks and/or horseflies) from animals such as capybara (Fig. 2) and in recent times with cattle. There is rarely any perching done on cattle but giant cowbirds follow them to consume insects that were stirred up by their hooves. Giant cowbirds will feed on capybaras while moving. They also search for fruit, nectar and arthropods along lakes and rivers (Skutch, 1954), and in banana plantations and corn. Giant cowbirds sometimes forage by themselves or in small flocks comprising of 2-12 birds, however on rare instances larger flocks of approximately 80 birds have been observed.

COMMUNICATION. The giant cowbirds' song is of a short, screeching and ascending quality during courtship. The female giant cowbird displays loud nasal whistles as a defence mechanism. This behaviour is mainly expressed when being pursued by host birds such as oropendolas. Jaramillo and Burke (1999) state that there is a characteristic sound produced when the male giant cowbird is in flight.

SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR. In courtship display, the male approaches the female with a rigid walk, puffed chest, and arched neck until the bill rests on the chest and fluffed body feathers. These birds are brood parasites, and rely on other species to raise their young. The cowbird has approximately ten host species, but caciques and oropendolas are the main hosts (Fig. 3). The cowbirds lay their eggs in the nest of these hosts which is not an easy task since it is vigorously defended. Fraga (2011) discusses his findings on giant cowbird parasitism on caciques in Argentina. From the 50 nests that were studied, 1-6 eggs were found in 27 cacique nests. The eggs were twice the size of the caciques' eggs but similar in appearance. During the study three cowbird eggs and four of the caciques' eggs were destroyed. Martin and Finch (1995) note that instead of the host species raising their own young, they are raising the young of giant cowbirds, causing declines in the host population which may eventually lead to those species becoming endangered.

REFERENCES

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Fig. 2. Giant cowbird, *Molothrus oryzivorus*, perching on a capybara.

[<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/58763566>, downloaded 12 November 2016]



Fig. 3. A giant cowbird visiting an oropendola nest.

[<http://www.pbase.com/image/40239681>, downloaded 12 November 2016]

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