



Brunswick Wildlife Warbler Nest Failure

This story does not have the ending I expected...yet I think the ending was a happy one. L.B. Bennett, Jr., who owns a hunting lodge on Rices Creek, asked me to identify the little yellow birds nesting in an abandoned wasp nest he had hanging on the side of his screened porch.

They were Prothonotary Warblers...one of the beautiful “swamp warblers” I wrote about a couple of months ago! I was licking my chops over the possibilities of taking photos over a period of weeks, capturing the adults feeding of the young and of the fledging!

Unfortunately, it did not turn out that way. I stopped by several times and took pictures of the nest building phase. On one visit, I noticed Brown-headed Cowbirds hanging around and even saw the female fly to the wasp nest before I shooed her away.

In my previous article I mentioned that warbler nests are sometimes parasitized by cowbirds. Brown-headed Cowbirds are brood parasites. They have evolved to not construct nests and they lay their eggs in the nests of other birds, depending on the other species to incubate and care for the young cowbirds. To make matters worse, cowbirds sometimes destroy or remove the host's eggs.

After a week or so without warbler activity at the nest, L.B. and I counted only four eggs. I collected the eggs two weeks later after waiting to ensure they were no longer viable. The four eggs pictured are one warbler egg (the smaller, pinkish egg) and three cowbird eggs.

Birds finding a cowbird egg in their nest toss it out, accept it, or abandon the nest. In this case the warblers eventually abandoned the nest.

I believe the cowbird broke the warbler egg and probably removed others. The broken cowbird egg looks like it contains a dead embryo. I am not sure how long before the

warblers abandoned the nest; however, it seems that the eggs were incubated for a period of time.

L.B. showed me a picture he took last year and it shows an adult Prothonotary Warbler feeding a mixture of cowbird and warbler nestlings. He plans to fill the cavities in the wasp nest and build and install nest boxes near the creek.

The parasitism reduces the brooding success of their hosts. In addition to the destruction mentioned above, cowbird nestlings grow faster and are more competitive for food than the host's nestlings which sometimes starve to death.

Historically the Brown-headed Cowbird (or Buffalo Bird as it was once called) inhabited the grasslands of the Great Plains and fed at the feet of Buffalo, depending on the big guys to scare up insects. Its regular host species in the grasslands evolved defense mechanisms to prevent some of the damage.

Over the past two hundred years, the cowbird expanded its range eastward as forests were cleared for farmland and pastures, forming suitable cowbird habitat... open fields with large animals. Unfortunately, cowbirds are now found across the lower forty-eight states, including year-round in Brunswick County, and eastern hosts have suffered greatly since most have not yet developed natural defenses.

Happy ending? I continued to hear the male sing and I am fairly sure the warblers re-nested in a safer cavity down by the creek. Re-nesting is fairly common in many species when nests are destroyed or abandoned. Also, Prothonotaries usually have two broods each season so I expect these two had a successful breeding season in spite of the false start.

John Ennis

