

### Bronzed Cowbird *Molothrus aeneus*

Like its better-known relative the Brown-headed Cowbird, the Bronzed Cowbird invaded southern California from the southeast. Unlike that of the Brown-headed, though, the pace of the Bronzed Cowbird's invasion has been glacial. Though the Bronzed was first recorded in San Diego County in 1973, 30 years later it is still rare, with only 17 records. Most of these are from or near the Anza-Borrego Desert, and some resulted from efforts to trap Brown-headed Cowbirds. Like the Brown-headed, the Bronzed Cowbird is a brood parasite, laying its eggs in the nests of other usually medium-sized songbirds.

**Breeding distribution:** The Bronzed Cowbird was not confirmed breeding in San Diego County 1997–2001, though likely it did breed. A male was displaying to two females 2.9 miles west of Jacumba (U27) in spring 1997 (F. L. Unmack), then an apparent independent juvenile (no red evident in eyes) was in the agricultural area of the north Borrego Valley (E24) 11 June 2001 (P. D. Jorgensen). The only previous confirmation of the species' reproducing in the county was the juvenile seen with Brewer's Blackbirds at Jacumba (U28) 13 July 1974 (J. L. Dunn). But all three specimens from the Anza-Borrego Desert are males in breeding condition with enlarged testes.

**Nesting:** Though Brewer's Blackbird is the only host of the Bronzed Cowbird known in San Diego County, other suitable species are readily available. Lowther (1995) listed the Northern Mockingbird and Hooded Oriole, common in San Diego County, as the birds most frequently reported parasitized by the Bronzed Cowbird. Lack of



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

suitable hosts is no block to the Bronzed Cowbird's further increase.

**Migration:** The Bronzed Cowbird is primarily a spring and summer visitor to southern California. With two exceptions, San Diego County records extend from 13 April (1991, one at Lower Willows, D23, P. D. Jorgensen) to 17 July (1974, pair at Jacumba, AB 28:951, 1974). Of San Diego County's 17 Bronzed Cowbird records, eight are from the Borrego Valley, one from Tamarisk Grove Campground (I24) 10 May 2003 (P. D. Jorgensen), and five from the Jacumba area (one in 1997, four in consecutive years 1973–76). There are three records from the coastal slope, only one on an expected date (6 May 1999, one at Dehesa, Q15, W. E. Haas). The other two coastal records are among the few winter records of the Bronzed Cowbird for California.

**Winter:** Two records, of immature males at Whelan Lake (G6) 28 February–21 April 1987 (J. O'Brien, AB

41:332, 490, 1987) and in a cowbird trap in the Tijuana River Valley (V10) 1 December 1998 (J. Wells, J. Turnbull, SDNHM 50154).

**Conservation:** The Bronzed Cowbird was first noted in San Diego County 3 June 1973, at Jacumba. The rate of occurrence is increasing only slowly, with gaps between records 1977–86 and 1992–96. The species' history in southeastern California, where it arrived in 1951 but is still scarce, suggests it does not have the Brown-headed Cowbird's capacity to increase explosively and threaten a broad spectrum of hosts.

**Taxonomy:** Bronzed Cowbirds from southern California are *M. a. loyei* Parkes and Blake, 1965, well differentiated from the other two subspecies in its comparatively large size and thick bill, gray not black female, and violet-rumped silky-plumaged male. For San Diego County this identification is attested by three specimens trapped in the Anza–Borrego Desert, two from Whitaker Horse Camp (D24; 23 June 1990, SDNHM 46772; 28 April 1997, SDNHM 49914) and one from Circle K Ranch (G25; 3 June 1998, SDNHM 50058), as well as the December specimen from the Tijuana River Valley.