

New immigrant: Shiny cowbirds noted from a recording altitude of 2,800 m in Ecuador

May 4 2016

Two juveniles of Shiny Cowbird, a parasitic bird that lays its eggs in the nests of other birds, were spotted in the Andean city of Quito, Ecuador, for the first time. This finding represents an altitudinal expansion of approximately 500 m.

Breeding populations might have been prompted by forest fragmentation and/or climate change, suggest the research team, led by Dr Verónica Crespo-Pérez, professor at Pontificia Universidad Católica del Ecuador (PUCE). Resultingly, the 'immigrants' could be threatening native [birds](#). The study is published in the open access *Biodiversity Data Journal*.

"The Shiny Cowbird is native to the lowlands of South America but within the last 100 years, it has been expanding its distribution to higher altitudes and latitudes" says the lead author.

The bird had already been noted from [high altitudes](#) in Bolivia and Perú, and in some localities in the Ecuadorian Andes. Since 2000, Juan Manuel Carrión, co-author and director of the [Zoo in Quito](#), recalls observing Shiny cowbirds near his home in a valley near Quito at 2,300 m above sea level (asl). However, one has never before been reported from an altitude as high as 2,800 m asl.

Moreover, the fact that the observed individuals were juveniles means that the species is already breeding in the city.

"Such a significant expansion of reproductive birds, of approximately

500 m, could be related to human disturbances, like [forest fragmentation](#) or [climate change](#)," adds Crespo-Pérez.

The observations took place at the PUCE campus about a year ago. Two juvenile Shiny cowbirds were seen parasitizing two different pairs of Rufous-collared Sparrow, one of the most common birds in Quito. The [cowbirds](#) displayed food-begging behaviors to adult sparrows, including chasing the sparrows on the ground and chanting intensely on bushes and tree branches.

"These observations mean that the birth mother of the cowbird laid her eggs in the nests of the sparrows, who inadvertently, became the cowbird's foster parents and incubated, fed and cared for the it as if it were its own, even though the cowbird is almost twice as big," says Miguel Pinto, co-author and professor at Escuela Politécnica Nacional, and former postdoctoral fellow at the Smithsonian Institution.

"The sparrows were not feeding fledglings of their own species, which suggests that the Cowbird could be having some negative effect on the Sparrow, at least on their ability to reproduce," points out Tjitte de Vries, co-author and professor at PUCE.

There are several published reports of negative effects of Cowbirds on other birds, especially on species that are already endangered or have restricted distribution ranges. Therefore, this report of an expansion of the Shiny Cowbird towards higher altitudes may be of concern, mainly for native, endemic or endangered bird species.

More information: Verónica Crespo-Pérez et al, The Shiny Cowbird, *Molothrus bonariensis* (Gmelin, 1789) (Aves: Icteridae), at 2,800 m asl in Quito, Ecuador, *Biodiversity Data Journal* (2016). [DOI: 10.3897/BDJ.4.e8184](https://doi.org/10.3897/BDJ.4.e8184)

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