

Examples of Real Life
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As I walked down into our local wash this morning, birds scattered like tossed confetti in the wind. The wash is a rich mine for a bird nut (me). Some birds flew nearby and landed, affording me good "looks" (birder lingo).

Most of the birds were old friends, thrashers, cardinals, tiny verdin and tinier gnatcatchers (Black-tailed Gnatcatcher for you birder types) and about 3 or 4 mystery birds I have noticed lately.

Hummingbirds and gnatcatchers engaged in aerial war, zipping around at each other, yelling profanities such as "you nest pooper!", "you're a lowly seed eater!" and "nectar waster!". The gnatcatchers were especially aggressive towards birds more than twice as big as they are (they are about 4 inches long, stretched out beak to tail tip).

I decided to just watch for a bit and hopefully identify my mystery bird. 3 or 4 of the mystery birds were apparently hunting insects amid the catclaw and mesquite and got quite close to me, allowing me some good photos. I was baffled by the bird but knew I would eventually figure it out because it looked sort of like a juvenile or female blackbird but not quite, heavier beak, wrong colored eye and so forth.



I stared at the mystery bird through the binoculars, and suddenly, it quivered its wings as juvenile birds do at approaching parents. Most of the local juvenile birds quiver their wings and scream "feedme-feedme-feedme!!" when they see mom or pop coming. It was a "bingo" moment because then I would have a clear identification when I saw the parent!

I couldn't have been more startled to see mother feeding baby!!! A tiny female gnatcatcher came along and stuffed some tiny morsel into the massive juvenile's mouth! The bird was over twice as big as the gnatcatcher, and I knew right away what the baby was, a parasitic Cowbird! I have seen this stuff on TV and have read about it but have never seen an example of it myself until this morning. And what a ludicrous example! How on earth a huge (comparatively) cowbird could even lay an egg in a tiny gnatcatcher's nest is beyond reckoning. One egg would fill the entire nest!

Cowbirds can impact local bird populations by becoming over abundant and stressing the local birds. I have noticed a number of Cowbirds around this summer. I have appreciated them (despite knowing their darker side), because they have very interesting-to-watch interactions with each other, and they hang around the horses all the time, eating flies! I guess even the bad guys have a bit of "good" in them.