

First Record of Shiny Cowbird (*Molothrus bonariensis*) in Maryland

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On 22 October 2017, I discovered a first-year male Shiny Cowbird (*Molothrus bonariensis*) (Figure 1) in my backyard in southern Montgomery County. Around 2:00 p.m., I noticed an unfamiliar blackbird perched on one of our feeder poles about 10 ft (3 m) away from the window. My first impression was that it was a Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), but the bird's scapulars lacked red and its plumage was more of an iridescent blue than a glossy black. I briefly considered it might be a Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) due to its iridescence, but the bird had a dark eye whereas the iris of a Brewer's Blackbird should be yellow. It also appeared smaller than either of those two species. After a few seconds of my examining it, the bird flew off its feeder pole and dropped down to the left out of sight. Still not able to identify it, I grabbed my camera and raced to another window, hoping I would have the chance to photograph it. The bird eventually waddled back into view and foraged on our lawn 10–40 ft (3–12 m) from the window. There was a flock of about 25 Brown-headed Cowbirds (*Molothrus ater*) and European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) also on the lawn, but the bird seemed only loosely associated with them and was not interacting with any particular individuals. I took as many pictures of it as I could before the entire flock took off to the north about a minute later.

In comparison with the surrounding Brown-headed Cowbirds, the bird was distinctly smaller and slimmer. Its head appeared smaller, and its bill appeared longer and more pointed with a straight culmen. Its plumage was mostly a glossy blackish-blue, particularly on its head, breast, and tail. My photos also showed some turquoise feathers in the tertiaries and secondaries, as well as some brown feathers in the greater coverts and primaries.

Immediately after the bird had flown, I sent texts with photos to several of my birding peers in the Youth Division of the Maryland Ornithological Society. Jerald Reb and Kojo Baidoo both identified it as a Shiny Cowbird, and I confirmed their identification after consulting my Sibley (2000) field guide. The bird's dark eyes, iridescent head and body, and small size were sufficient to eliminate every North American species except for Shiny Cowbird. I submitted a report to the Maryland/District of Columbia Records Committee (MD/DCRC), and Phil Davis, Secretary of the MD/DCRC, aged the bird as a first-year male after examination of my photos, due to the brown feathers in its primaries



Figure 1. First-year male Shiny Cowbird, *Molothrus bonariensis*. Bethesda, Montgomery County, Maryland; 22 October 2017.

(Lowther and Post 1999). I texted other birders of my sighting and the access guidelines they should follow, but, despite diligent searching, the bird was not relocated that day or for weeks afterward.

An entire month had passed without any observations when the bird turned up again in our yard around noon on 22 November 2017. I informed the birding community, and others re-sighted it that evening. In the following days, it was discovered that the bird was frequenting a secluded backyard around the block, where it was being fed regularly by the homeowner. The bird was seen consistently until 15 January 2018 by over 180 birders. The Montgomery County Shiny Cowbird was accepted by the MD/DCRC and placed on the official list of Maryland birds in January 2018 (MD/DCRC 2018).

NORMAL RANGE

The Shiny Cowbird is native to South America, occurring throughout much of the continent from southern Argentina to northern Costa Rica (eBird 2019). In the last century, the species began expanding its range through the West Indies (Post and Wiley 1977, Raffaele et al. 1998). In 1985, the first Shiny Cowbird was recorded in United States on Lower Matecumbe Key in Florida (Paul 1985). By 1991, the Shiny Cowbird was considered a permanent resident of south Florida (Lowther and Post 1999). Today, the Shiny Cowbird is uncommon and local in coastal south Florida, very rare or casual in the Southeast north to South Carolina and west to central Texas, and accidental elsewhere (Dunn and Alderfer 2017).

NORTHEASTERN AND MID-ATLANTIC RECORDS

The Shiny Cowbird moved into South Carolina in 1990 (CBCBRC 2018) and North Carolina in 1989 (CBCBRC 2018). It progressed north and has been reported from many northeastern states. It was first recorded in Virginia in 1996 (VARCOM 2018). Table 1 shows the state-bird-records-committee-accepted records for Shiny Cowbird in the Atlantic coastal region north of Florida. In Florida, Shiny Cowbirds are not a review species (FOSRC 2018). Shiny Cowbirds have been sighted in Maine, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia (Table 1), as well as in Alabama, Texas, Oklahoma, Tennessee, and Michigan (Table 2) (eBird 2019), and in New Brunswick (Lamèque, 5 August 1993) and Nova Scotia (Canso, 13–14 June 2004), Canada (Christie et al. 2004, Kavanaugh and Crane 2004, NSBS 2019). Records are clustered between Georgia and North Carolina ($n = 54$), with all the other states having one record each (Table 1). Records have occurred in every month of the year, with the majority of records occurring in May ($n = 14$), June ($n = 17$), and July ($n = 12$) (Table 3). It is worth noting that Maryland has the only record of this species in winter away from the southeastern Atlantic Coast.

Table 1. Summary of official state-bird-records-committee-accepted records of Shiny Cowbird, *Molothrus bonariensis*, in the Atlantic coastal region. States are ordered north to south. NWR = National Wildlife Refuge; WMA = Wildlife Management Area.

| State | Date | Location | County |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------------------|-------------|
| Maine (MBRC 2018) | 24–26 May 1991 | Monhegan | Lincoln |
| New Hampshire (NHRBC 2010) | (No records) | | |
| Vermont (VBRC 2018) | (No records) | | |
| Massachusetts (MARC 2018) | 14 Oct 2002 | Herring Creek Farm, Edgartown | Dukes |
| Rhode Island (RIARC 2018) | (No records) | | |
| Connecticut (ARCC 2017) | (No records) | | |
| New York (NYSOA 2018) | (No records) | | |
| Pennsylvania (PORC 2018) | 2 Jun 2013 | Hampton | Adams |
| New Jersey (NJBRC 2017) | (No records) | | |
| Delaware (DBRC 2018) | (No records) | | |
| Maryland/DC (MD/DCRC 2018) | 22 Oct 2017–15 Jan 2018 | Parkwood, Bethesda | Montgomery |
| West Virginia (WVBRC 2018) | (No records) | | |
| Virginia (VARCOM 2018) | 19 Aug 1996 | Surry | Surry |
| North Carolina (CBCBRC 2018) | 16 Nov 1989 | Aurora | Beaufort |
| | 9–29 Oct 1990 | New Bern | Carteret |
| | 30 Oct 1991 | Fayetteville | Cumberland |
| | 29 Oct–14 Nov 1992 | Cape Carteret | Carteret |
| | Jun 1993 | Figure Eight Island | New Hanover |
| | Jun 1993 | Cape Lookout | Carteret |
| | Early Jan–Mid Feb 1994 | Wilmington | New Hanover |
| | 26 May 1995 | Cedar Island | Carteret |
| | 9 Nov 1996 | Winston-Salem | Forsyth |
| | 15 May 1997 | Cedar Island | Carteret |
| | 9 Jul 1997 | Stumpy Point | Dare |
| | 8–11 Jul 1998 | Fort Fisher | New Hanover |
| | 8 May 1999 | Fayetteville | Cumberland |
| | 7 Jun 1999 | Cedar Island | Carteret |

| State | Date | Location | County |
|------------------------------|--|--|----------------------------|
| | 30 Jun 1999 | Lola | Carteret |
| | 14 May 2000 | North Topsail Beach | Onslow |
| | 26–29 May 2000 | Bodie Island | Dare |
| | Early Jul 2000 | Fort Macon | Carteret |
| | 7 Oct 2002 | Cedar Island | Carteret |
| | 23 Jul–7 Nov 2004 | Pea Island NWR | Dare |
| | 19–20 Jan 2005 | Goose Creek State Park | Beaufort |
| | 13 May 2005 | Fort Macon | Carteret |
| | 30 May 2008 | Pea Island NWR | Dare |
| | 14 Jun 2008 | Hillsborough | Orange |
| | 13 Jun 2009 | Oregon Inlet | Dare |
| | 25 May–5 Aug 2017 | Fort Macon State Park (likely breeding) | Carteret |
| | 1 Jun 2017 | Sneads Ferry | Onslow |
| | 20 Apr–20 May 2018 | Fort Macon State Park | Carteret |
| South Carolina (CBCBRC 2018) | 3–24 Jun 1990 | James Island | Charleston |
| | 30 Apr–13 Jul 1991 | Sullivan’s Island | Charleston |
| | 25 Mar 1995 | Lone Star | Calhoun |
| | 4 Jul 1995 | Mount Pleasant | Charleston |
| | 26 Nov 1996 | Huntington Beach State Park | Georgetown |
| | 5 Jun–12 Jul 1997 | Harbor Island | Beaufort |
| | 18–25 Jun 1998 | Savannah Spoil Site | Jasper |
| | 3 Aug 1998 | Savannah Spoil Site | Jasper |
| | Late May 1999 | Harbor Island | Beaufort |
| | 13 Jun 1999 | Sullivan’s Island | Charleston |
| | 1–2 Jul 1999 | Savannah Spoil Site | Jasper |
| | 27–28 Aug 1999 | Cape Romain NWR | Charleston |
| | 10 May 2000 | Savannah Spoil Site | Jasper |
| | 16 Oct 2001 | Huntington Beach State Park | Georgetown |
| | 1 Apr 2002 | Savannah Spoil Site | Jasper |
| | 6 Jul 2002 | Edisto Island | Charlestown or Colleton |
| | 19 May 2003 | Savannah Spoil Site | Jasper |
| | 8 Jul 2003 | Mount Pleasant | Charleston |
| | 18–19 Jul 2003 | Savannah Spoil Site | Jasper |
| | 13 Aug–14 Sep 2003 | Savannah Spoil Site | Jasper |
| | 25 Sep 2004 | Folly Beach | Charleston |
| | 14 Jun 2006 | Huntington Beach State Park | Georgetown |
| Georgia (GCRC 2019) | 28 Oct 2006 | Altamaha WMA | McIntosh |
| | 9 Sep 2007 | Brunswick | Glynn |
| | 6 Jun 2013 | Blackbeard Island NWR | McIntosh |
| | 3 Jun 2016 | Tybee Island | Chatham |
| Florida (FOSRC 2018) | Resident in southern FL; non-review | | |

Table 2. eBird reports of Shiny Cowbird from the United States, excluding Florida and coastal Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana (eBird 2019).

States are ordered north to south. *Italics* means the eBird report is not found in the official bird records for that state.

| State | Date | Location |
|------------------|--|---|
| Michigan | 3–4 Jun 2017 | Whitefish Point |
| Maine | 25 May 1991 | Monhegan Island |
| Massachusetts | 14 Oct 2002 | Edgartown |
| Pennsylvania | 2 Jun 2013 | Adams |
| Maryland | 22 Oct 2017–15 Jan 2018 | Bethesda |
| Virginia | 19 Aug 1996 | Surry |
| Oklahoma | 12–14 Jun 1990 | Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge |
| Tennessee | 6–20 Jul 1995 | President's Island |
| Texas | 3 Feb 2000 15 Apr 2001 26 Apr 2003 | Houston Port O'Connor Jefferson |
| North Carolina | 12 Jul 1998 23 Jul–12 Nov 2004 19 Jan 2005 30 May–13 Jun 2013 25 May–5 Aug 2017 20 Apr–20 May 2018 | Fort Fisher Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge Goose Creek State Park <i>Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge</i> Fort Macon State Park Fort Macon State Park |
| Alabama (inland) | 20 May 2003 | Cleburne |
| South Carolina | 26 Jun 1990 25 Jun 1997 18–25 Jun 1998 28 Jul 1998 1 Jul–1 Sep 1999 24 Sep 1999 10 May 2000 1 Apr 2002 4 Jun–13 Sep 2003 | Charleston Harbor Island Savannah Spoil Site Sullivan's Island Savannah Spoil Site <i>Sullivan's Island</i> Savannah Spoil Site Savannah Spoil Site Savannah Spoil Site |

| State | Date | Location |
|--------------|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| | 7 Sep 2003 | <i>Harbor Island</i> |
| | 18 Jun–2 Oct 2004 | Savannah Spoil Site |
| | 7 Jun 2006 | <i>Savannah Spoil Site</i> |
| | 7 Jul 2018 | <i>Hardeeville</i> |
| Georgia | 15 May 1989 | Cumberland Island National Seashore |
| | 26 Jun 1998 | <i>Soggy Meadows Farm</i> |
| | 24 Jan 1999 | <i>Soggy Meadows Farm</i> |
| | 16 Nov 1999 | <i>Soggy Meadows Farm</i> |
| | 5–7 May 2000 | Jekyll Island |
| | 28 Oct 2006 | Altamaha Wildlife Management Area |
| | 27 May 2007 | <i>Darien</i> |
| | 25 Sep 2007 | Brunswick |
| | 3 Jun–23 Jul 2016 | Tybee Island |

Table 3: Number of Shiny Cowbird state-bird-records-committee-accepted records per month, 1989–2018: Maine to Georgia. Data were obtained from Table 1. Note: Official Georgia records were only accessible from 2002 onward.

| Month | Number of Records |
|--------------|--------------------------|
| January | 3 |
| February | 1 |
| March | 1 |
| April | 3 |
| May | 14 |
| June | 17 |
| July | 12 |
| August | 6 |
| September | 4 |
| October | 9 |
| November | 6 |
| December | 1 |

The first record of the species in the Atlantic coastal region was in 1989. Since then, there have been 28 records from the 1990s, 23 records from the 2000s, and 7 records from the 2010s. Since 2004, there have been only three records of this species north of North Carolina: Pennsylvania in 2013 (Table 1), Michigan in 2017 (Table 2; eBird 2019), and Maryland in 2018.

Given that the Shiny Cowbird was found in Virginia in 1996 and Pennsylvania in 2013, it is surprising that this species was not recorded in Maryland until the 2018 Montgomery County bird.

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