

MAY 01-14, 2022, NATURAL HISTORY NOTES

By Dick Harlow

AMERICAN BITTERN



American Bittern, *Botaurus lentiginosus*
© Mitch Waite Group.jpeg

For Six of the last nine years Cindy and I have been at EastView, we have heard or seen the American Bittern at either or both of EastView's North and South ponds. I do not believe there is enough food in either pond to allow this wader to successfully nest and bring up young here, but the ponds seem to entice males to visit in early spring who are then heard calling for females. I have not witnessed pairs but have seen and heard "oonk—o-lunk", from a single male Bittern each of the six years. On May 6th of this year, we heard and then saw a male American Bittern fly from one end of South Pond to the other.

Bitterns are very cryptic and hard to see in amongst the cattails, but when they

are looking for food and moving about that is when you can catch a glimpse of one. Haven't been lucky enough to catch one with my camera as yet but will continue to try!

As can be seen from the picture and the first paragraph, bitterns like freshwater ponds and marshes. This species nests in marshes using cattails as their primary nest building material. The female is the nest builder and the male's responsibility are to protect the female as well as defend his territory.

They can be seen in the Winter around saltwater marshes, but their preference, especially during nesting season seems to be near freshwater.



*American Bittern range map from **Birds of the World**, maintained by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology*

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Their primary prey item is fish, but will also feed on frogs, snakes, various crustaceans, insects, and rodents.

The concern with this species is that their numbers seem to be declining due to diminished freshwater wetlands and suitable habitat to nest.

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD



#1 Brown-headed Cowbird, *Molothrus ater*, male, © Dick Harlow

It is easy to distinguish the difference between the male and female Brown-headed Cowbird. The male, picture #1, has a brownish head and blackish body with some iridescent feathering covering the rest of the body. The female on the other hand looks entirely different. It is a brownish gray color over its head and lightly striped belly with darker gray-brown feathers over its back and tail as seen in picture #2.

This species is called an “**obligate brood parasitic icterid**” which simply means it depends on other birds to raise its young. Therefore, the female will watch for a likely species candidate,

usually a Song Sparrow or Warbler species. While the suspect bird is away from its nest the female cowbird will enter the nest lay its egg and leave. This is usually done after the suspect female has already laid an egg in her nest.

The result is that the sparrow or warbler female ends up raising a larger hungrier chick at the expense of her own chicks. It takes a great deal of energy for the adults to find food and feed their young. The cowbird chick is double the size of any chick in the nest and that chick alone will crowd out the other chicks in the nest as well as out demand food when parents return to the nest to feed them. Consequently, most of the other chicks do not survive, and why this species is considered a parasitic species.



#2 Brown-headed Cowbird, *Molothrus ater*, female, © MadisonAudubon.org

If you look at the accompanying range map you will see Vermont is caught between year-round range and breeding range. Here in Middlebury, we see cowbirds in Spring, Summer, and early Fall, but not usually during the late Fall

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or Winter. They may simply move to southern Vermont or Massachusetts in the Fall and return in April or May.



Brown-headed Cowbird Range Map
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[All Measurements taken at solar noon](#)

[\(1230 EST\).](#)

PRECIPITATION

Average May Precipitation for Vermont = 3.46 inches.

Total precipitation for the first two weeks in May was 5.8 mm or 0.23 inches. EastView is 3.23 inches below the May average.

Overcast Days 1-14: We had 5 days of overcast skies. Of those overcast skies 3 days produced rain.

OBSERVATIONS

MAMMALS

Gray Fox
White-tailed Deer
Eastern Cottontail Rabbit
Field Mouse
Meadow Vole

AMPHIBIANS

American Bull Frog
Green Frog
Spring Peeper, *Pseudacris crucifer*

First butterfly of the season a Cabbage White seen on May 8, 2022.

Ruby throated Hummingbird arrived May 10, 2022.

FLOWERS

Tulips
Daffodils
Dandelions
Common Violet, (*Viola sororia*), blue/purple
Common Violet, (*Viola sororia*, 'freckles'), white with freckles of violet

Tree & Shrub Flowers

Maple
Pine
Amelanchier (Canadian Serviceberry)
Crab Apples
Rhododendron (Dwarf)
Shadbush (Amelanchier species)