

Tijuana River Valley Regional Park
Cowbird Trapping Program
May 15, 2007

Background

As a condition of the Tijuana River Valley Regional Park (TRVRP) Trails and Habitat Enhancement Project Environmental Impact Report (EIR) certified by the County Board of Supervisors on December 16, 2006, the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) must implement a brown-headed cowbird (*Molothrus ater*) trapping program.

Most cowbird species are generalist parasites, laying their eggs in the nests of a wide range of other bird species. The brown-headed cowbird has spread from its original home in the Great Plains through anthropogenic conversion of forests into farms and pastures. They tend to be associated with dairies, stables, and other areas where large domestic animals are present because they forage on the grain that is provided to the animals, as well as on the insects that are attracted to the animals' manure. The cowbird is now sufficiently numerous to pose a major threat to the continued survival of several avian species and subspecies that it regularly parasitizes. As a result, much research effort has recently been directed at understanding the breeding biology of brown-headed cowbirds. Of particular concern in the TRVRP are the least Bell's vireo (*Vireo bellii pusillu*) and the southwestern willow flycatcher, two special status species that have experienced a great reduction in population size due to cowbird parasitism. In addition, the coastal California gnatcatcher (*Polioptila californica californica*) is another special status species that has been documented to serve as host to nest parasitism by the cowbird.

Cowbird trapping will be performed by trained professionals. These professionals must own their own traps, possess required permits, and demonstrate knowledge of trapping protocols. Below is the proposed program. This program may be subject to revisions during the contracting process.

Methods

Cowbird traps shall be erected along the Tijuana River in areas near concentrated uses, such as the staging areas and well used trails. The trapping locations shall be accessible to vehicles and there should be water and perching areas nearby. A reconnaissance of the area shall be conducted to identify potential predators. Measures shall be implemented to protect trapped birds from predation. The traps shall be erected and set by March 15 and will be checked daily from March 15 through June 1.

Trap Set Up

Traps should be erected on level ground with no gaps between the frame and ground. Any gaps should be filled with dirt. If the traps are located in non-shaded areas, a portion of the trap shall be covered to provide shade.

A one gallon water container shall be placed in each trap. Bird feed should be scattered onto the ground of the trap, making sure not to drop seed into the water container. If the bird seed becomes wet from precipitation or other means, the seed shall be collected and properly disposed. The seed shall then be replaced with fresh, dry seed.

Cowbirds are gregarious, therefore, traps work best if there are live decoys in the traps to attract adjacent birds. At least two to four cowbirds shall be used as decoys in the traps.

Trap Operation

Once the birds have been caught in the trap, a large net shall be used to catch the non-target birds for immediate release.

Cowbirds caught in the trap shall be humanely euthanized. There are various methods to humanely euthanize cowbirds. Two known methods are as follows:

- Cervical dislocation: Hold top of neck between thumb and forefinger, grip head with other hand, turn and lift until you feel the cervical vertebrae detach from the head.
- Euthanasia: Cut a hole in the top of a 5-gallon bucket, cover the opening with a piece of material. This hole will be used to place the cowbirds inside. Fill the bucket with Carbon dioxide (CO₂) gas (dry ice is a potential source of CO₂. The bird must not directly contact dry ice if it is used).

Traps shall be removed from the TRVRP by June 1st.

Data Collection

Data collection shall include, at a minimum, date, location (GPS), number and names of species collected, and gender of individuals collected.

Reporting

The data sheets and a report documenting the findings of the year's trapping program shall be submitted to DPR. DPR will be responsible for submitting the document to the US. Fish and Wildlife Service, the California Department of Fish and Game, and the City of San Diego MSCP. Details of the reporting requirements will be established by DPR during the contracting process.