

FIRST RECORD OF SHINY COWBIRD (*MOLOTHRUS BONARIENSIS*) IN
NEVIS, WEST INDIES

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Abstract. --- I observed and photographed a flock of Shiny Cowbirds (*Molothrus bonariensis*) on the golf course at The Four Seasons Resort on Nevis along the island main road, on the leeward side of the island of Nevis, adjacent to the Caribbean Sea (IHO 1953: 14-15), within St. Thomas Parish, Nevis, The Federation of St. Christopher and Nevis, West Indies, on 19 August 2011.

Key words. --- *Caribbean, Molothrus bonariensis, Nevis, Shiny Cowbird.*

SHINY COWBIRD (*MOLOTHRUS BONARIENSIS*)

Seven subspecies of Shiny Cowbird are listed by Dickinson (2003: 773) and AOU (1998: 648) does not show Shiny Cowbird occurring on the island of Nevis. Raffaele *et al* (1998: 438-439) state: ‘**Shiny Cowbird is not yet known to have colonized Anguilla to Guadeloupe in the northern Lesser Antilles**’. A fuller description of the current ranges of Shiny Cowbird can be found in Raffaele *et al* (1998: 438-439) and AOU (1998: 648).

NEVIS

Nevis is a compact oceanic island of volcanic origin with an area of circa 93 km² (circa 36 square miles), situated in the northern Lesser Antilles. Politically it is a portion of the two island country, The Federation of St. Christopher and Nevis. The island rises gradually from the shore to a central peak of circa 985 meters (circa 3232 feet) and exhibits a range of natural and secondary habitats which include: elfin woodland, montane forest, palm brake, grassland, coastal scrub, dry woodland, and farmland (Robinson and Lowery 2000).

THE RECORDED SIGHTING

On 19 August 2011, I observed and photographed a flock of approximately 25 Shiny Cowbirds, feeding on the ground by the side of the fairway of the 6th hole of the golf course at The Four Seasons Resort, Nevis, West Indies, along the eastern side (inland side) of the island main road, near the Caribbean Sea (the leeward side), on the island of Nevis (17 degrees, 9 minutes, 18.53 seconds N, 62 degrees, 37 minutes, 22.16 seconds W; WGS-84; and circa 52 feet above sea-level). The birds were studied through binoculars (Swarovski, 10x42 EL) at moderately close range (30 meters) in mid-day light. A flock of circa 25 Shiny Cowbirds was also found in the same location on the next day (20 August 2011) and was also photographed. The birds were photographed by Mark Michael Ludlow with a Nikon Coolpix P-90 with a Nikkor 24X Optical Zoom ED VR 4.6 – 110.4 mm, 1:2.8 – 5.0 lenses (Figure1).

The section of the island main road in which the birds were observed can be characterized an anthropogenically structured, highly manicured, artificial environment characteristic of golf courses and planned golf course communities. The Robert Trent II designed golf course is situated in a gently sloping area, adjacent to the Caribbean Sea, on the leeward side of the island of Nevis. This is an artificial construct of a landscape that is in stark contrast to the substantially altered lower elevation landscapes of Nevis. These lower elevation areas are in an arrested state of ecological succession. Colonial period mono-agribusinesses and other contemporary anthropogenic activities caused the denudation of most vegetation up to the c. 305 meter (c. 1000 foot) elevations on the island which resulted in substantial soil erosion which continues into the contemporary period. This arrested ecological succession is greatly impacted by the behaviors of large populations of island wide free ranging ungulate species, to include: sheep; goats; donkeys; horses; pigs; and cattle. The impacts of these introduced animal species are effectively concentrated in what is relatively small island consisting of circa 93 square km (circa 36 square miles). Large populations of historic period introduced Vervet (Green) Monkeys (*Chlorocebus pygerythrus*), believed to be of African origin, as well as introduced Mongooses (Family *Herpestidae*) further contribute to the alteration of the disfigured landscape and to the depauperate faunal composition and numbers.

This photo-documentation represents the first record of both the presence of Shiny Cowbird (*Molothrus bonariensis*) and of a feeding flock of both male and female Shiny Cowbirds (*Molothrus bonariensis*) on the island of Nevis, West Indies.

No action was taken to determine the subspecies, ages, sexes, or other physiological conditions of the individuals.

This observation was part of the efforts of the newly formed Nevis Ornithological Society to document all of the species of birds to be found solely on the island of Nevis (and proximal Booby Island). Historically bird species listings have artificially conjoined the two geologically and ecologically separate and distinct islands (the island of St. Christopher (St. Kitts) and the island of Nevis): An example would be the 'Locality Checklist' within Raffaele *et al* (1998: 453-495). The Nevis Ornithological Society is also attempting to: 1) systematically review and evaluate reported bird sightings on the island of Nevis, as well as Booby Island, with a high degree of academic rigor; and 2) provide a central repository for those accepted reports that are solely for the island of Nevis.

This flock of Shiny Cowbirds may represent a continuation of their recorded expansions within the insular Caribbean and North American mainland (Bond 1993 impression 214-215; Raffaele 1998: 438-439; AOU 1998: 648). A fuller significance of this sighting remains undetermined. Combined with past and future records, fuller patterns may become clearer. As in this case, and in the future, increasing numbers of bird watchers and researchers in the field, on comparatively remote and under frequented islands, for sustained periods of time, may account for increasing numbers of documented reports.

The Shiny Cowbird is thought to be circa the 152th species of bird documented for the island of Nevis, West Indies (Ludlow 2007, 2010a, 2010b) and circa the 199th species of bird for the politically conjoined islands of St. Kitts and Nevis (as per Michael Ryan – personal communication).

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Figure 1. Shiny Cowbirds (*Molothrus bonariensis*) on the fairway of the 6th hole of the golf course at The Four Seasons Resort – Nevis, St. Thomas Parish, Nevis, West Indies, dated 20 August 2011. Photograph taken by Mark Michael Ludlow.