SUMMARY OF 2001 TRAVIS COUNTY

BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD TRAPPING PROGRAM

Travis County Parks and Natural Resources

Project Number 0905-01909

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INTRODUCTION

Both Black-capped vireos (*Vireo atricapillus*) and Golden-cheeked warblers (*Dendroica chrysoparia*) are parasitized by the brown-headed cowbird (*Molothrus ater,* hereafter cowbird). Cowbird trapping is recommended as an important management technique for both species. This report summarizes the results of the 2001 Travis County Brown-headed cowbird-trapping program. Traps were operated at three sites: Hamilton Pool Preserve, Lake Perspectives tract and on a private ranch adjacent to the Vireo Ridge tract on FM 2769.

BACKGROUND

During 1998, cowbird trapping efforts in Travis County were initiated at Davenport Vireo Preserve (now the City of Austin Vireo Preserve), The Uplands, and Steiner Ranch. Trapping had been conducted in Travis County for the Balcones Canyonlands Preserve by Espey Huston and Associates and DLS Associates (1989), and Texas Animal and Damage Control (1990-1996). Since that time, trap locations have been added and removed according to trap success or failure and access availability. The 1997 season was the first time Travis County Natural Resources Department operated a cowbird-trapping program. Travis County and the City of Austin co-managed the cowbird control program however in 2001 the City of Austin operated a program independently from the County.

METHODS

Trapping in 2001 was conducted exclusively in the western half of the county (where BCVI and GCWA habitat occurs). Travis County operated three Metal Hybrid cowbird traps. These traps were acquired from Texas Parks and Wildlife and reinforced with poultry fencing along the outer base edges to prevent predator entrance by digging under the traps. Two new trap sites were added to the program, one at the Lake Perspectives tract and the other at a private ranch located adjacent to the Vireo Ridge tract on FM 2769. New trap locations were based on observed cowbird activity during the 2000 field season and the abundance of livestock found along the FM 2769 corridor. One other Hybrid trap was placed at Hamilton Pool Preserve in a location to better facilitate Preserve staff. The Modified Australian Crow trap used in 2000 at Hamilton Pool Preserve was not used in 2001 due to its archaic design and logistics. Travis County chose not to operate two, off-property traps (Riverplace and Steiner Ranch) due to staff time and overall trap inefficiency in 2000.

Decoy birds (44 males, one female) were obtained from personnel at Ft. Hood. The Lake Perspectives trap was opened on March 28 and closed on April 25. At this time, nine males and one female were given to USFWS personnel to be used as bait birds for their traps. Four remaining male cowbirds were added to the FM 2769 trap. The FM 2769 trap was also opened on March 28 but left operating until June 29. Decoys for the trap at Hamilton Pool Preserve were obtained from the FM 2769 trap. The Hamilton Pool trap was opened on April 10 and closed on June 6. All cowbirds remaining at Hamilton Pool Preserve and FM 2769 were euthanized. Euthanasia techniques included thoracic compression and cervical dislocation.

Traps were checked at least 3 times a week throughout the season until juvenile birds began appearing in traps on a regular basis. Traps were then checked more frequently. Water and feed (milo) were refreshed on each visit.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Total captures by class (male, female, and juvenile), captures by month, and captures by trap for 2001 are presented in the following table.

Trap location	Month	Days in operation	Males captured	Females captured	Immatures captured	Total	Trap efficiency*
Lake Perspectives	March	4	0	0	0	0	.000
	April	25	4	0	0	4	.000
	Total	**29**	**4**	**0**	**0**	**4**	**.000**
Hamilton Pool Preserve	April	21	0	2	0	2	.095
	May	31	1	1	0	2	.032
	June	6	0	0	0	0	.000
	Total	**58**	**1**	**3**	**0**	**4**	**.052**
FM 2769	March	4	9	1	0	10	.250
	April	30	12	11	0	23	.367
	May	31	11	29	0	40	.936
	June	25	5	0	8	13	.000
	Total	**90**	**37**	**41**	**8**	**86**	**.456**
Grand Total		**177**	**42**	**44**	**8**	**94**	**.249**

*Trap efficiency (capture rate) = # females/days in operation

During the 2001 season a total of 42 male, 44 female and 8 juvenile cowbirds were captured (94 total). One non-target species (female yellow-headed blackbird, *Xanthocephalus xanthocephalus*) was trapped and safely released. No snakes were observed in any traps although a Sharp-shinned hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) was observed several times on top and occasionally diving at the FM 2769 trap.

Overall, the trap with the greatest capture rate was FM 2769 (0.456). This trap also had the highest single month capture rate (May, 0.936). The 2769 trap was also in operation the longest period of time. The success of this may have reduced the Lake Perspectives trap's effectiveness (four cowbirds trapped in 29 days) by possibly eliminating an abundance of birds that use the FM 2769 corridor, although other factors may also have contributed to the low capture rate. The Lake Perspectives trap will be moved to the eastern side of the Jollyville Unit for the 2002 trap season where numerous cowbirds were observed during the 2001 field season

April and May were the months with the greatest number of captures (29 and 42 respectively). During May, 30 females and 12 males were captured. Juveniles were captured only during June and only at the FM 2769 trap.

Low trap success at Hamilton Pool Preserve over the past two seasons seems counterintuitive considering the abundance of cowbirds present. In 2002, a Mega Trap baited with no fewer than 25 birds will be operated at Hamilton Pool Preserve at a location where many individuals were observed the past two years.

Trap placement continues to be the limiting factor for the cowbird control program. Coordinating with neighboring landowners, especially those with livestock, may provide opportunities for optimal trap sites. This was the case with the trap on FM 2769 where, we believe, the presence of horses greatly increased our trap success. Further, data on nest parasitism rates, primarily of black-capped vireos (and when possible, golden-cheeked warblers) will continue to be collected to assess the program's effectiveness. No evidence of nest parasitism was noted during the 2001 field season for either species.