

Bird watcher finds elevation reveals changes

See Mr. News 29 July '82

A Report from Tonto Hills
by Frank Casanova

On June 1, we moved from the true Lower Sonoran Zone in Cave Creek, at about 2,200 feet elevation, to the lower edge of the Upper Sonoran Zone in Tonto Hills at 3,500 feet elevation, as indicated by the appearance of a few Utah junipers. I'd like to write about other changes in vegetation between the two areas, and differences in birds observed thus far, but for now I want to relate one specific incident.

Hooded orioles are around daily; we noticed Scott's orioles by the end of the first week, and we have seen a Bullock's oriole just once. On the minus side, it wasn't long before we had a flock of 30 Brown-headed cowbirds monopolizing the feeder, with a few Bronzed cowbirds lending them support.



By June 19 we became aware of an intriguing but elusive song, mostly early in the morning and in the evening - three or four notes run together ending in an accented "teak." On the 22nd we finally tied the song to a Scott's oriole perched on a yucca stalk across the wash. By the time hot weather arrived in the middle of July his song was heard less frequently.

On the morning of July 17 a male Scott's flew to the top of a hackberry and a Bronzed cowbird flew up from the feeder, landed beside him and fluttered her wings as if begging to be fed. He touched her bill (maybe did feed her something) and then flew down to the tops of the turpentine bushes, uttering at intervals a "dick" note that sounded like a blackbird, and apparently searching under the bushes for food.

Almost two hours later we again noticed him with a green-winged insect in his bill, and a female Scott's nearby. The cowbird and two immature Brown-headed cowbirds were feeding on chicken scratch on the ground. He flew down and repeatedly tried to feed the insect to the cowbird. Initially she again fluttered her wings but wanted no part of that insect. When she flew to the rim of the birdbath he followed her and repeatedly, first from one side and then from the other, would stretch forward trying to get the insect in front of her bill.

It was kind of pathetic watching this beautiful bird trying to feed the comparatively ugly cowbird, fully as large as he apparently thinking it was his offspring. When she returned to the ground he followed and the performance con-

tinued for several minutes. Now, it seems evident that the orioles had hatched and reared this bird. Sadly, no young Scott's orioles are in evidence, apparently having been crowded out (if the orioles eggs were not in fact replaced) by these parasites. Florence Merriam Bailey quotes Major Bendire as listing 91 different species of birds in whose nests the cowbird is known to have left her eggs, including orioles.

I had ended this column here and had it in an envelope for mailing, but now on the evening of the 19th, I have more to add. At 5 this evening the male was back, again with a green-winged insect, in the top of the hackberry. Another bird, which I could not see because of foliage, flew up beside him and fluttered its wings.

An hour later the pair of orioles were around, the male with a green insect in his bill. This time I got a better look and feel quite sure it was a katydid - perhaps this is his favorite prey. The female accompanied him back and forth between the hackberry and mesquite for a while before she flew off. He seemed to be searching for that Bronzed cowbird to feed. A Brown-headed cowbird flew up near him but he ignored it. Wish I had timed it but he sat around for nearly 15 minutes holding that katydid before he, too, flew off.

If you too have an observation you would like to share with others, please send it to this column c/o BMN.

The CCIA urges residents to watch a T.V. special on the Arizona Bottle Bill Campaign (ABBC) on KTVK Channel 3 on "Under the Sun," hosted by Jan D'Atri. The special will be shown on July 31 at 5:30 p.m. One of our committee members, Geoffrey Platts, spent a day recently shooting scenes of can and bottle litter on highways and in the desert.

Also, please remember to collect cans from the roadsides and save them for our fall "great trash gathering."