



# California Wildlife Center

## Patient of the Week

**September 19, 2025**

### **Brown-headed Cowbird**



Brown-headed Cowbird moved to outdoor enclosure.

Earlier this month we received a juvenile male Brown-headed Cowbird from Pasadena Humane Society. While the exact reason for admittance is unknown, the injuries suggest that he sustained some type of blunt force trauma. Our technicians found blood in the nares (small openings on the top of the beak), feather loss, mild head swelling and a slight left-wing droop which could suggest a window strike, though this can't be confirmed. Because the patient was able to self-correct the wing droop, our team chose to monitor his progress and provide supportive care, including anti-inflammatories and fluid therapy.

Brown-headed Cowbirds are the most common “brood parasite” in North America. These birds lay eggs in the active nests of other bird species and abandon their eggs, depending on the host nest to raise their young. Instead of spending their time raising nestlings or preparing nests, they prolifically produce eggs, sometimes laying up to 40 a season!

Interestingly, many host birds don't recognize these eggs as different from their own, but if they do, the adult bird is either too small to remove the cowbird eggs or if they are large enough will puncture the eggs and toss them out of the nest. Cowbird eggs that remain in the nest often hatch earlier and develop faster than their foster siblings, giving them a competitive advantage during feeding.

Brown-headed Cowbirds are usually seen in fields where livestock are present and feed on the insects that the animals kick up. The males of this species also have brown heads which are reminiscent of a brown cow.

When Dr. Michaels examined the patient two days later, the wing droop and swelling had resolved. She recommended continuing the anti-inflammatories along with one full week of cage rest before moving him to an outdoor aviary. Since moving outside, the Brown-headed Cowbird has been thriving and showing no signs of weakness or flight deficiency. He will likely remain outside for at least two weeks for monitoring before being evaluated for release. If the patient's progress continues, we're hopeful he'll be ready for release soon!