

Morning View Kentucky
3 July 1957

Sorry, Mr. McCarthy,

But I am not at all remorseful about the Cowbirds. I slew one just yesterday with considerable contentment, and the satisfying feeling that I had done my good deed for the day.

I think we fail to agree on the Cowbird question because of a basic difference in our attitude toward birds. You are able to view them with complete objectivity, whereas, to me, they are friends and neighbors. I am as impelled to assist young birds in trouble as I would be to help neighbors' children if they were being attacked by a dog or had lit themselves with matches.

I have never seen an English Cuckoo, young or old, but that pain-reaction business you read seems an incredibly wild tale. Apparently any very young, unfeathered bird will jerk spasmodically to the touch of something strange, but I doubt that pain is involved.

Yesterday the Carolina Wrens hatched in the nest atop the electric soldering iron on the shelf in the tool house, and, when both parents were absent, I touched them lightly with assorted objects. They twitched and fidgeted uneasily, but showed no signs of actual suffering. To the touch of my fingers, which were warm, they responded not at all.

There would appear to be one fundamental difference in the behavior of the young Cowbird, and the young Cuckoo. According to what you read, the Cuckoo endeavors to shove everything out of the nest within the first few days of his life, when he is as yet unfeathered. The Cowbird, on the contrary, waits until he is well feathered and his bill has hardened sufficiently to inflict injury. Then, if the rightful proprietors of the nest have not already starved, the young Cowbird, with great deliberation, either ruthlessly hacks them up with his bill, or grasps them firmly, usually by the neck, and hauls them about until he succeeds in heaving them over the side of the nest.