

How to save Willow Flycatchers

An interview with the Mono Basin's Willow Flycatcher expert

by Lisa Cutting and Chris McCreedy

As this year's summer field season started to wind down, I sat down with Chris McCreedy to catch up on his work monitoring Willow Flycatchers in the Mono Basin. Chris is a staff biologist for PRBO Conservation Science and has been studying the Willow Flycatcher population on Rush Creek since he first discovered them to nest there in 2001.

Willow Flycatchers are small migratory songbirds that are in the Mono Basin only in summer. They are an endangered species in California with only 1,000–2,000 individuals left breeding in the state annually. During the 1990s when the Jones & Stokes consulting firm was compiling information for the Mono Basin Environmental Impact Report, they found the Willow Flycatchers to be completely extirpated from the Mono Basin. Since their return in 2001, Rush Creek is now the only place on the Inyo National Forest where they currently breed.

Lisa Cutting: So Chris, how did you discover the Willow Flycatcher on Rush Creek back in 2001?

Chris McCreedy: I was working for Sacha Heath of PRBO Conservation Science, who was conducting an Eastern Sierra riparian breeding bird study that went all the way from Sonora Pass to Owens Dry Lake. The Mono Basin was part of her study area and she was particularly interested in birds' response to restoration actions. We had nest plots on Rush, Lee Vining, Mill, and Wilson Creeks. It was during the summer

of 2001 that we discovered the Willow Flycatchers nesting on Rush Creek.

LC: What happened after that discovery?

CM: After seeing them in 2001 we found them again in 2002. I wrote a proposal to the Inyo National Forest to study the Willow Flycatcher exclusively on Rush Creek. That proposal was successful and the Inyo has funded my work ever since. Every year I go out, find Willow Flycatcher nests, and band the adults and the chicks. Essentially, I'm tracking the Mono Basin population and documenting trends.

LC: So what is the current status?

CM: Back in 2001 we had three territories with six adults total and by 2004 the population was up to 16 adults so it was increasing rapidly. But since 2004 it's gone down every season, mainly because of low productivity. They're not reproducing enough to keep the population going. The primary reason for that is both nest depredation from Brown-headed Cowbirds and cowbirds parasitizing nests.

Brown-headed Cowbirds are a kind of blackbird. They don't make their own nests, they only lay their eggs in other species' nests. When cowbirds lay their eggs in a host nest, their eggs hatch faster than the host eggs and their young develop faster and so the host young rarely succeed in the presence of a cowbird egg. So basically, if a cowbird finds a flycatcher nest

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Biologist Chris McCreedy with Rush Creek's only successful Willow Flycatcher fledglings of the 2009 season.

the flycatcher nest is almost certainly going to fail.

Cowbirds are not able to sustain themselves in desert habitats without humans feeding them at bird feeders or indirectly at pack stations, on farms, or via livestock. The Willow Flycatchers on Rush Creek are threatened by these cowbirds and the cowbirds are able to flourish because they are being fed by the people in the Mono Basin.

LC: *Why do cowbirds rely on human assistance?*

CM: Well, cowbirds aren't really desert birds. Over the years they have adapted by congregating near areas where farming and grazing has occurred in order to feed. We don't really have that in the Mono Basin anymore but the cowbirds persist because they can get food from bird feeders. The cowbirds will eat in town in the afternoons and then go out to the creeks at night to roost. In the mornings they look for bird's nests to parasitize.

And it's not only the Willow Flycatchers that are affected. Yellow Warblers, Dusky Flycatchers, Song Sparrows—all of these are potential cowbird hosts. As long as people in town provide food for cowbirds there's really no ceiling as far as how many there can be.

My sense is that there are more cowbirds now. And last year, mostly because of cowbirds, Willow Flycatchers didn't breed at all. All of their nests failed so they had total breeding failure in 2008. That nearly happened again this year, but one nest fledged two chicks late in the season.

LC: *Now I'm thinking of the Mono Basin Bird Chautauqua and all the outreach that we've done about birds in the Mono Basin. I think people have developed an affinity for birds and bird feeding. So is there a way to still let this happen without supporting the cowbirds?*

CM: I know it's hard to tell people to not feed birds so much. I love ecology so I think of it like this: for me I would never recommend feeding anything. When you do that you disrupt the natural balance which can effect the entire system. But if people are going to feed birds I would make the following recommendations: First—do not feed in the summer at all between April 1st and September 1st because it's the summer breeding season when the cowbirds are the most active. Second—if people have to feed I suggest hummingbird feeders and goldfinch socks because cowbirds can't access those feeders. Third—since bird feeders have been found to spread avian diseases, the ideal way to bring birds to your yard is to plant lots of plants that birds like such as native berry trees and berry bushes instead of using feeders.

LC: *I'm really intrigued with the connection between the Willow Flycatcher recovery and all the restoration work that's happening on the creeks as ordered by the California State*

Water Resources Control Board. It will be interesting to track this as the restoration process continues into the future and we see even more recovery down at the creeks.

CM: Yes, the restoration is awesome! In the Great Basin these functioning lower elevation riparian habitats like Rush Creek are really rare. Lots of animals are benefiting from the water and the habitat that the water creates. On Rush Creek the Willow Flycatcher population is down to seven adults. That's it. There aren't really any other places in the region where Willow Flycatchers are known to breed, which could provide additional numbers to the Rush Creek population to get more. So if we lose these it might be a long time before Rush Creek has a population again. Every year I get maybe one or two new birds from somewhere else. Two of the last five years I haven't seen any new birds.

So we have this awesome restoration that's really successful, and it's brought back the Willow Flycatchers. But at the same time, the restoration is sort of being undermined by this really common, everyday occurrence of people who just love animals feeding an animal that has a really big negative impact on what's happening on Rush Creek. So it would be like if we restored Mono Lake but then let people dump motor oil in it.

LC: *It sounds totally ironic and definitely not consistent.*

CM: And a lot of people that feed the cowbirds love birds so it's doubly ironic. But it's not a hopeless situation. Fortunately, in the Mono Basin there really is no agriculture nor grazing, and my sense is that in Lee Vining there aren't a lot of people that are feeding cowbirds, there are a few. So, if we can show people what happens when you feed birds, perhaps they will stop. This isn't a case where this isn't anything that people can do, there are things that people can do to help the Willow Flycatcher. And because it is a small number of people we have a greater chance of overcoming this problem in the Mono Basin than in other places. People just need to have a greater understanding of the consequences of their actions and how they can feed birds responsibly or perhaps not at all. ❖

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What you can do

For a great handout on safe bird feeding practices visit www.prbo.org/cms/docs/edu/SafeFeeders.pdf. For more information on safe bird feeding specifically in the Mono Basin please visit www.monolake.org/about/birdfeeding.pdf. For Chris McCreedy's Willow Flycatcher research reports visit www.monobasinresearch.org and <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul/24/local/me-mono24> for an LA Times article on Chris' research on Rush Creek.