

## Dance of the Male Bronzed Cowbird

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For many years, I have sought out opportunities to experience, firsthand, the dance of the male Bronzed Cowbird. His dance involves vocalizations and a series of postures, ruffling of feathers, and an impressive hovering and helicoptering flight pattern above a female Bronzed Cowbird. The sole purpose of all this is to catch the eye (and favor) of a potential mate. He delivers quite an aerial spectacle to impress her with an unbelievable flight performance comprised of rapid-fire, fast moving wing beats that lift him up off the ground, a mere foot or so, directly above her.



Hovering flight display of male Bronzed Cowbird

Before I go any further in my nature story, I must make you a promise. My promise to you is this: I will do my best to relay the “Dance of the Male Bronzed Cowbird” for you in still images---which are “video grabs” taken from my original trail camera video. However, if these still images leave you yearning to see the authentic trail camera videos with your very own eyes, check the links to the Mesteño Mini Movie---in its entirety---at the end of this story. Then, you will be able to see, hear, and experience, for yourself, the entire dance of the Bronzed Cowbird.

Now, back to the Bronzed Cowbird nature story....

As I began to do a deep dive into birding over the last several years, I have had the good fortune of having numerous opportunities to listen to fantastical tales of the hovering and helicoptering aerial dance of the male Bronzed Cowbird from experienced birders. Naturally, I was (and have been) really intrigued by stories of how visually stunning this aerial display is. Frequently, as I listened to these stories, my mind would often wander back in time through all my bird memories from years of traipsing around natural habitat in the Rio Grande Valley. At the end of each trip down birding memory lane, I always ended up at the same conclusion. The conclusion being that I had never, not even once, witnessed any birds’ flight pattern that remotely came close to resembling stories of this almost unbelievable hovering / helicoptering aerial dance performed---just a few feet off the ground---by a striking black bird with eyes as red as garnets or rubies.

Then, one day about three years ago, it happened. I saw the dance!

It came without fanfare, or binoculars, or a cellphone, or a camera, and my view of the dance was almost completely obstructed by knee-high plant material. Rats! This dazzling flight happened about fifty yards away from me on a red, sandy sendero, and the glance I caught of it was just enough for me to realize that it was the elusive dance and subsequent flight of the male

Bronzed Cowbird. The glimpse I caught of him was just as he had reached his max flight height of about two feet off the ground---and well above the native plant material.

Almost as quickly as the dance had begun, however, it was over. The male Bronzed Cowbird effortlessly fluttered back down to Earth, once again obscured by plant material. Equal parts of both elation and disappointment flooded and raced through my mind. Nevertheless, I vowed to keep going and not give up on the pursuit of a full, unobstructed, up close, and personal front row seat to the “Dance of the Male Bronzed Cowbird.” ---either by my own observation, trail camera footage, or both.

It took another year or so, but I finally did catch the helicoptering / hovering behavior on trail camera, only to have it completely blurred by condensation that had developed on the trail camera lens. All you could really hear was the sound of its wing beats, which, by the way, reminds me of the sound film projectors used to make in elementary school. Once again, I was disappointed. My hopes were dashed, but I kept the faith that I would be able to document the dance of the male Bronzed Cowbird at some point.

This summer I have finally been able to document this dance in its entirety! I am elated to report that I have been fortunate to have more videos of this male, Bronzed Cowbird doing his “helicopter / hover” flight pattern than I had ever dreamed or imagined possible to have. Be careful what you wish for! His performances do not lack effort or intensity despite the brutal, extreme heat of this summer of 2023. Would you believe that there have been so many encore presentations of the “Dance of the Male Bronzed Cowbird” on my trail camera this summer, that I even got tired of watching them for a few weeks? Can you believe that?



Trail camera captures mating dance of the Bronzed Cowbird

Well, that is a bit of an over exaggeration, but what is not an exaggeration is that I would say that I am truly amazed that in heat indices above 100 degrees Fahrenheit, this little bird is expending huge amounts of energy, not to mention expiring a lot of moisture out of its system, to win favor from a potential mate. In fact, he valiantly hovers in the air for several seconds, while glancing down at his potential mate, numerous times over the course of several weeks. As I watch these beautiful exchanges on the hot, dry, arid South Texas Sand Sheet, I can almost hear him chirp, “Look at me! Look at me! Pick me!” The dance of the male Bronzed Cowbird is a testament to a few adages like “survival of the fittest,” and “where there is a will there is a way.”

My favorite part of this dance: The mesmerizing, stroboscopic effect of his wing beats. One cannot help but become transfixed on the imagery. The visual phenomenon, known as the “stroboscopic effect” that one experiences when observing the male Bronzed Cowbird in flight, in and of itself, is quite astonishing. However, while the visual story of the “Dance of the Bronzed Cowbird” is quite remarkable, the rhythmic, hypnotic sounds emanating from his wing beats during his dance leave quite an equally dazzling impression on my naturalist mind. Music to my ears. Frankly, the sight and sound of this dance is not something that you will soon forget!

In closing, this nature story has been years in the making, and it would be a travesty to keep this dance all to myself. It was difficult to pick the top three or four videos to make the movie compilation---each one giving a slightly different view or angle of the dance. I even have several close-up videos of the male Bronzed Cowbird’s take off, flight display, subsequent landing, and continued ruffled-feather display---which reminds me of Elvis in one of his capes on a TV concert from the 1970s, but I digress.

For those of you that would like to watch the dance of the male Bronzed Cowbird, I will share a couple of links to the “Mesteño Mini Movie” I created. The mini movie is a compilation of a few of my recent trail camera videos of this incredible nature story. I hope it wows you as much as it has wowed me!



“Look at me! Look at me! Pick me!”

Links to view:

El Mesteño Ranch and Arboretum Website

[https://elmestenoranch.com/2023/08/\\_/5034/](https://elmestenoranch.com/2023/08/_/5034/)

El Mesteño Ranch and Arboretum YouTube Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYIgG6Oz8CQ>