

He's a Yellowthroat, Not a Cowbird

Trichas flitted from cattail to cattail, hidden by the tall weeds and other marsh grasses. In her beak she held a fine piece of grass. She flew past a few reeds and lit on a cattail blade, where a small cup-shaped nest sat cradled by a patch of bulrushes. It was almost done. She curved the grass into the nest, smoothing it out with her slim, black beak. Then, she nestled into the soft lining.

Later that day Trichas felt a pang of hunger in her stomach. She hopped out of the nest, revealing a pearly white egg with brown markings. It was a perfect oval. Three feet below her a spider scurried around. He stopped on a patch of moist soil, where pond water lightly licked the earth. Trichas hopped down and took a well aimed stab at it. The legs folded and crunched as she swallowed the brown arachnid. Not enough. A cabbage butterfly flew low to the ground, finally landing on a beautiful columbine flower. The olive-winged warbler dived, sweeping the delicate creature into her beak. She loved these small delicacies because they could be found in such great numbers during the blooming season.

With two fairly tasty meals resting in her stomach, she sat down again on her nest to lay two more round eggs. Her mate, Thlypis, watched curiously from across the marsh. His black "mask" made him look like a bandit. The male yellowthroat played no role in nest building or brooding. All he had to worry about was being there to feed the chicks when they hatched. Until then, he set his mind on chasing those first year warblers off his territory.

Nearby, Molo looked around intently for a nest. She was a Brown-Headed Cowbird, a parasitic bird. She felt the eggs ready in her body and knew they needed a nest. What better place to find hosts than in Warbler Marsh!? She whistled when she saw a fine cup-like nest tucked neatly between some bulrushes. The mother was not present so Molo invited herself into the bird's territory. She dropped one egg into the nest. It was almost identical to the other three eggs already there. She heard a *wichity, wichity, wichity* from across the marsh and flew off to find a host for her other six eggs.

Trichas examined her nest, confused. She thought she had laid only three eggs and now four resided in her nest. The egg was most definitely hers, though. It looked exactly like it was supposed to. She concluded that she had been so hungry after laying the eggs that she couldn't remember how many she had truly laid. She tucked herself into the nest, ready to incubate four yellowthroat eggs.

After eleven days the small bird felt a stir beneath her. She sat up, looking down on the oval eggs. One was starting to tremble. A tiny crack began and, like an earthquake, slid down to the side of the egg and branched into more cracks. The tree of cracks grew until finally a small, grayish beak appeared. Two beady eyes peered out. Then, a wet baby bird struggled out of the white, spotted shell. Trichas disposed of the shell then came back to find another egg hatching. She brought them each a throat full of insects including caterpillars, moths, and spiders. Thlypis, seeing his mate up and about, followed with a single butterfly in his beak. The hatchlings *clucked* and *cheeped*, stretching their necks out for more.

The next morning another egg hatched. It broke open quickly, revealing a large, brown, and wet bird. He was extremely ugly and large for a yellowthroat but Trichas accepted him as her baby. She fed him a few water striders, which were everywhere at

this time of year. Her mate, Thlypis, returned with a spider. She rolled her eyes at him. He was such little help. This baby would obviously need more than one spider.

The big bird, seemingly jealous, got quite a bit pushy over the next two days. He consumed all food and space around him. One day, Trichas came home with a big, fuzzy caterpillar. The brown hatchling opened his mouth wide and screamed for the tasty dinner. One of the smaller hatchlings made the mistake of snatching it first. The larger sibling reached over, grabbing it for himself. The little yellowthroat was shoved over the edge of the nest in the brown hatchling's quest for food. He tumbled into the marsh below, where a hungry turtle watched.

Trichas didn't know what to do and two more horrid days passed. Her whole life was now consumed with feeding this monster and yet she still accepted him as her chick. Her other two chicks became skinny and frail, overpowered by their brother .

Molo sat mixed in with some juvenile Red-Winged Blackbirds. They gargled and chirred. Occasionally she whistled but mostly she was trying to watch the nest hidden among the cattails. She saw Thlypis fly low then start walking around. She knew this behavior all too well. Yellowthroats never flew directly to the nest, so as not to give its location away to predators. She watched as he finally alighted on the edge and three heads popped out. One, she recognized, was noticeably larger. She whistled in amusement as the five inch long warbler fed her giant brat. This was what she wanted.

After four days the three were ready to fly. Both yellowthroats, Geo and Richy, were Male. Though they were immature they had the starting of a black Mask. The cowbird Othly was Male, as well, but he would remain brown until he was an adult.

Trichas was glad when she found the cowbird finally taking an interest in something other than food. He tested his wings a few times and quickly learned how to make use of them. He followed Trichas around the marsh, begging for food at every turn. She stuffed his mouth with a moth and chucked at him to go away. Geo and Richy followed, too, and managed to get a bite here and there. They quickly learned that they got more food if they found it themselves. Their Mother was too busy feeding Othly.

Two days later, Geo and Richy noticed a change in their parents. It was time to leave mom, dad, and the cup-shaped nest. Trichas called and *djipped* at them whenever they came near. At first, Richy opened his mouth for food. Trichas pecked at him and spread her wings. He was confused and hurt so he tried Thlypis. When he saw that they no longer wanted him, he flew off across the marsh to start his own life. Geo stuck with his brother for awhile but eventually peeled off.

Othly noticed these changes, too. He was more persistent, however. At first Trichas consented to feeding him a single spider. Then it became two spiders and then three. Thlypis came over and *chucked* harshly at the cowbird chick. They both loved their strange son very much but he was getting to be quite obnoxious.

Pit, pit. Trichas called in a flat tone.

She pecked his wings and face, trying to get him to go. Finally, she just flew off. Thlypis took off in the opposite direction. Othly followed his mother but when she did not feed him he flew off to find his own. When he returned to the nest that afternoon he found no brothers and no parents. It was an empty nest. A sad feeling filled his heart. Othly knew it was at last time to be on his own.

The lonesome cowbird flew across the Marsh up to Cowbird Bluff, where he found a female cowbird whistling away. She flew over to a blade of grass and called for

him to come join her and a flock of cowbirds located on the other side of the bluff. He whistled back but did not stay to continue the conversation. He was a yellowthroat, not a cowbird.

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