

Yard and Garden – 05-02-09 – Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

A-well-a, everybody's heard about the bird

The bird bird bird, the bird is the word

In 1963 a rock group formed in Minneapolis, Minnesota, called *The Trashmen*. That year, their hit song *Surfin Bird* featured the above lyrics. Interestingly, other than inserting a few other words now and then, those same lyrics were chanted over and over throughout the entire song. Although the song was never a favorite of mine, its catchy beat and odd lyrics stuck, and it has become one I'll never forget.

While visiting the local coffee shop, a conversation prompted me to recall this tune. Our discussion focused on *Quiscalus quiscula*, commonly called the blackbird, but more accurately called the common grackle.

I'm not an ornithologist, or even an astute birdwatcher, but recently, this critter has caught my attention and the attention of many homeowners.



Photo by : Audubon Society ... Howard B. Eskin photographer

The common grackle is a member of the blackbird family. About ten-to-twelve inches in length, the grackle is slightly larger than a robin. Its color is basic black with transitions to a shiny iridescent purplish, blue-black around the head and throat. This color combination is more visible in the male. Mature grackles have bright yellow eyes. The central tail feathers are long and often lowered to form a keel V-shape when in flight. Grackles are strong, swift fliers.

East of the Rockies, the grackle is one of the most abundant birds in North America. They are migratory birds, spending their winters in the southern United States. They returned to Nebraska about three weeks ago. Because they commonly nest in colonies of thirty to fifty pairs, their presence is noticeable. Grackles are right at home in urban landscapes. They prefer evergreens such as spruce, pine and cedar for nesting and gather in noisy groups high in the trees. Because of their large numbers, they often bully other birds in the landscape, driving them off.

Now is the breeding season for grackles. During courting, the male grackle fluffs his body feathers, spreads his wings, and uses several vocalizations to impress the prospective female. The adult female lays between four and five eggs in nests well concealed in the boughs of trees.

To the south of our property, our neighbors have a beautiful Colorado blue spruce growing adjacent to our backyard. Approximately sixty feet away on the northeast side of our backyard is a fifty-foot-tall Norway spruce. In the two trees, a colony of over fifty grackles has set up shop. With such great numbers and with all their screeching and squawking, they are annoying.

Furthermore, an extremely odd and most disgusting characteristic of grackles is about to happen. Baby grackles will soon be hatching. There will be a constant commotion of adults flying in and out of the nests carrying food to their babies. This added activity intensifies the screeching and squawking. All this eating creates waste. When the babies deposit their fecal droppings in the nest, the adults pick it up in their beaks, fly out of the nest and drop it.

The preferred target is a body of water. We have a birdbath in the backyard which becomes a floating sewer of grackle droppings. In addition to this disgusting habit, the adults will then bathe and drink the contaminated water. Just thinking about it makes me ill. I am draining, cleaning, and refilling the birdbath on a daily basis.

My problem is small. Imagine how repulsive this must be to those people who own swimming pools. The good news is, after the young fledge and fly away, the grackles seem to move on. They nearly vanish for the balance of the summer. Hooray!

Grackles are native migratory birds. They fall under the jurisdiction of the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act; thus grackles are given federal protection in the United States. I did read that they can be destroyed when found “committing or about to commit depredations upon ornamental or shade trees, agriculture crops, livestock or wildlife, or when concentrated in such numbers and manner as to constitute a health hazard or nuisance.”

Now that I’ve enlightened you about the annoying grackle, I’ve got a hunch you too may be singing,

A-well-a, everybody’s heard about the bird

The bird bird bird, the bird is the word even if it’s the annoying grackle.