

Blackbird or Black Bird?

By Susan Heath

In honor of Halloween, I thought I'd talk a little bit about birds that are black, some of which are blackbirds and some of which are not. The first one is the Great-tailed Grackle. If you've been to any shopping center along the Texas coast, you've seen a Great-tailed Grackle. The males are all black, the females rich brown and both sexes have very long keel-shaped tails. They are quite fond of picking the insects off the grill of your car and will hop up off the ground to do so.

Currently, this species ranges from Louisiana west to California, south through Central America and north to Colorado and Kansas, but in the early 1900's their range barely extended into southern Texas. They have taken advantage of human induced changes and now have one of the fastest expanding ranges in North America. They do not migrate so they are with us year round. In the winter, they congregate into huge roosting flocks that are quite noisy and can become a nuisance. If you've been to Florida, you may have seen the very similar looking Boat-tailed Grackle taking over the parking lot monitor job. Boat-tailed Grackles range through all the Gulf States including Texas, but they are confined to the salt marshes of the immediate coast except in Florida.

Another black bird we have is not a blackbird at all and that is the crow. They are much heavier bodied than the grackles but because of the grackle's long tail, they are about the same length. Crows also have a much heavier bill. We have two crows in Texas but only American Crows are widespread. Fish Crows are found in east Texas usually around water while American Crows range is much larger. The American Crow makes the typical caw-caw-caw sound we all associate with crows. Fish Crows make a more nasal anh-anh kind of sound. While you might find an American Crow walking around in a suburban park, you will rarely find them in parking lots.

In the winter, we have a couple of other all black birds. One is the Common Grackle. This is the species of grackle most likely to raid your bird feeder along with the Red-winged Blackbirds. They are a bit smaller than the Great-tailed Grackle and don't have the keeled tail. They look more like the Red-winged Blackbird that they associate with than the Great-tailed Grackle but they don't have the red marks on their shoulders. As with the crow, they won't be found walking around a parking lot so don't look for them there.

The final black bird that I'll mention is the Brewer's Blackbird. This species is also in our area only during winter. Their favorite hangout is in the muddy areas of a cow pasture especially around the feed bins where they pick up left over grain. This is a really gorgeous bird. The males are glossy greenish bluish black and the females are a gentle shade of gray. They are quite common further west and south but you have to look a bit to find them in the eastern part of the state.



Brewer's Blackbird

So now you know when someone talks about blackbirds, you have to ask if they mean black birds or blackbirds!