

The Much Maligned Grackle By Martin Hagne

Grackles: they're those noisy, gregarious, black birds that seem to be everywhere. That's about as much attention we pay to them. But there is a world of fascinating behavior and social structures that we can learn about these birds. They are quite fascinating and entertaining!

Grackles belong to the bird group called icterids. This is a rather diverse group of birds, including blackbirds, cowbirds, grackles, bobolinks, meadowlarks, and even the colorful orioles. The most noticeable of these are usually the Great-tailed Grackles. They are not as large as crows but they are often mistaken for them. The males are a dark shiny black, often with a beautiful iridescent blue and green sheen to their feathers when seen in the sun. Females have much more subdued blacks and browns, and are sometimes mistaken for a different species all together.



Their cousins, the Boat-tailed Grackles, are very similar but sound a bit different. They also have a more rounded head, and have dark eyes instead of yellow. Boat-tails are only found along the immediate coast and marshes, and not too far inland. Great-tailed Grackles can be found everywhere! The Common Grackle is their smaller cousin, which only resides here during the winter months, often moving around mostly in the country side in large flocks. They look similar but are about two thirds the size of their Great-tailed cousins.

Great-tails are very social animals, and they live in a social structure that can include thousands of birds. We see this especially in winter, when they can form night roosts with tens of thousands of birds, often in large parking lots such a grocery stores that have trees. It's quite the cacophony of noise! And quite a bit of "white wash" for unfortunate car windshields!

But during the day, we can watch them as they hop from car to car, flying up to the bumpers and grills to pick off all the dead bugs. Great-tails have found a definite feeding niche. And they scavenge for french-fries and other morsels dropped by us. On a recent bird monitoring site, I watched as a few grackles who had been standing many hundreds of feet away, all of sudden appeared by my feet when I dropped a few bits of bread...and before long there were dozens of these birds out of nowhere!

Females have been observed to “mourn” a deceased bird. For example, a male grackle was hit by a car and landed in the gutter. Within seconds a group of about 10 females flew in, formed a ring and “walked in a circle” around the male... something that would seem like a funeral procession to humans. What it really was is of course conjecture by us... but a fascinating behavior none the less!

Grackles can certainly be mischievous, and are known to raid other bird nests for eggs or chicks. They can also be messy, and loud. But no matter what people feel about them, the fact remains that they are very smart, highly resourceful, and quite entertaining to watch. They have quite the attitude and I love watching them from my office window here at the Gulf Coast Bird Observatory, or off our deck at home! The next time you see one, take a moment to appreciate this special bird!

Photo by Martin Hagne. Caption: A Great-tailed Grackle ponders the presence of a photographer.