

Grackles

By Celeste Silling

Some of the more common birds we see here in Texas are the Grackles. You can hardly walk through a supermarket parking lot without seeing one of these brown or black birds peering out at you from under a car. Sometimes, they'll even come right up to you and inspect your purchases. This invasive behavior coupled with their sometimes-abrasive calling might make the Grackles seem like a bit of a nuisance bird. But in fact, these are some very interesting animals!

There are three species of Grackles that are commonly seen in Texas: the Common Grackle, Boat-tailed Grackle, and Great-tailed Grackle. While these are all separate species, they are closely related and look very similar to one another. The adult males all have glossy, iridescent black feathers that can appear as dark blue, green or purple in the right light. The adult females are smaller and have a duller brown color, and are often mistaken for different species entirely.

All three of these Grackle species have been shown to be quite intelligent. The Great-tailed Grackle, for example, is able to learn to recognize and remember individual humans. Grackles can also learn to take advantage of human behavior, like scavenging where we commonly drop food or following us as we eat outside. That's one smart bird!

Grackles are well known for their many calls. While most birds stick to a few melodious chirps, Grackles are able to make a wide variety of interesting sounds, from tinkling "clinks" to metallic rasps to something like a gunshot. These calls mean different things to the birds, and they use these sounds to communicate with each other. For people first arriving in Texas, though, many of these calls can be alarming, especially when they are loud and nearby. But for those of us who have been initiated, the Grackles' calls might as well be the official soundtrack of Texas.

Grackles are highly social creatures, which is why we often see them in flocks of hundreds or thousands. They also tend to flock together with other birds such as Brown-headed cowbirds and starlings. This flocking behavior is believed to give them an advantage over predators; with many eyes on the look-out, they are more likely to see an attack coming. They can also forage together to find more sources of food. Grackles eat plant material like fruit, corn and grains, as well as meat material such as insects, small fish, and chicken nuggets.

Grackles, especially Great-tailed Grackles, have adapted amazingly well to human-inhabited areas. They can nest on buildings or telephone poles and like to roost or hunt in parking lots or other human-made structures as well as trees. Female Grackles can even incorporate human trash into their nests by weaving in things like bits of paper, plastic bags, and string. It's nice to see that at least some animals are benefiting from our litter!

Grackles are so common here in Texas that we often take them for granted. But look closely, and you'll see that these are smart, beautiful birds! The next time you spot a Grackle strutting through a parking lot, watch... I'll bet it's up to something interesting!

Photo by Kenlynn Volz. Caption: In the right lighting, male Grackle feathers have a blue, green, and purple iridescence.

