

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Birds We Love to Hate: Grackles



Have you ever noticed that first impressions can be deceiving? You might see someone with weird clothes and think they must be weird too. Then when you actually get to know them they are just as normal as you. Well that's what this new column is about – getting to know some birds you might have some misconceptions about or even biases against. I am convinced that all birds have their place in the greater scheme of things and that we can at least come to respect if not love them for who they are.

The first bird on the list is the Common Grackle. I chose to start with this bird because everyone, including myself, was complaining about them this spring. They appeared on many backyard feeders and stayed much to our disapproval. But I am not going to dwell on the negatives. What I want to do is tell you some very interesting, cool facts about these handsome birds.

The grackles that took up residence in my yard this season showed up in late winter as they usually do to chow down on some suet. But they also discovered the peanut feeder. Like many of the other ground feeding birds they started off picking up pieces that fell on the ground. However, it didn't take these intelligent birds long to figure out how to perch on the feeder and get the peanuts themselves. The grackle bill, however, isn't made like a woodpecker's or chickadee's who usually hammer the kernels into smaller pieces. And the peanuts were a little too big and hard for the grackles to eat whole. I was surprised and fascinated

to watch as one of the birds took a peanut from the feeder and went over to the birdbath and dumped it in the water. It then proceeded to take a few drinks, preen a few feathers and generally harass one of its relatives. After few minutes it went back to the birdbath and took the peanut out of the water and slide it down its throat whole! This behavior is called – what else – dunking and is done for a variety of reasons one of which is to soften the food item for digestion.

I watched this behavior on numerous occasions throughout the spring and summer.

Grackles are pretty opportunistic when it comes to food, but generally they eat more insects and other invertebrates during the breeding season and then switch to seeds and fruits during the rest of the year. Most of us are aware that jays and oak trees are intricately connected, but are not aware that the grackle's bill is also uniquely designed to eat acorns. Its bill has a hard, internal keel projecting downward from the horny palate, which is very sharp. This keel extends below the cutting edge of the bill and is used as sawing adaptation to open acorns, which are often completely scored around shorter diameter and then cracked.

Farmers and bird feeders lament that the grackle eats too much and is a pest. But did you know that the grackle is on of the few animals that will eat Japanese beetles? Which pest would you prefer to have around? They also consume a large number of grasshoppers and crickets.

Both the common and scientific name of this bird is a puzzle. The genus name *Quiscalus* gives scholars a case of the frets. Does it come from the Latin *quis* meaning 'what', and/or quails meaning of what kind? But why? Or does it come from *quiscalis* for quail? Or does it come

from the Spanish *quisquilla* meaning to quibble – a reference to the noisy, chattering birds? Or from the Latin *quisquiliae* meaning refuse, *dregs* referring to the diet of the garbage bird? Linnaeus, who designated the genus, was not known to invent names, but in this instance he has left everyone guessing.

In the fall and winter grackles congregate in large mixed flocks with red-wings, meadowlarks, and starlings. One of my favorite experiences is being at Pee Dee NWR and running into one of these flocks moving through the fields. One time we watched them move through the low grounds for over 15 minutes. There had to be close to 100,000 birds. I bring up these big flocks because in the fall and winter we actually have three different races wintering in NC – one from the central part of the country, one from further north and of course our own resident birds. So for those of you who want to take your identification skills up a notch – try to id the different races. Birds from the central part of the country show a uniformly brassy bronze back and belly and purplish tail. The head color is somewhat variable but usually blue-green. This race was formerly considered a separate species. The resident NC birds typically have a dark green back and the tail blue-green; the head is usually purple and the belly purple-blue. The birds from up north generally have a purple back and belly and the tail usually blue-green. Good luck.

So the next time you see a common grackle consider some of their positive attributes and unique characteristics. They should give you a different perspective on this often maligned bird.

