

Common Grackle

Quiscalus quiscula quiscula

Three subspecies of Common Grackles exist, distinguished by the color of the back, tail, belly, and to a lesser extent, head.

Q.q.quiscula, known as the Florida Grackle, is a year round resident from southeastern Louisiana east to southeastern North Carolina, and south through Florida. It's the one at Corkscrew. The back is typically dark greenish-black, the tail blue-green, the head purple, and the belly purple-blue.

Q.q.versicolor, a.k.a. the Bronzed Grackle, breeds westward from the Appalachians and is highly migratory, wintering to south Texas and east to South Carolina. It has a uniformly brassy bronze back and belly and a purplish tail.

Q.q.stonei, a.k.a. the Purple Grackle, is found between the ranges of the other two and into southeastern New York and Connecticut. Its back and belly are purple and its tail usually blue-green.

The Florida Grackle is a year round resident but there is seasonal migration between wintering and breeding sites where large numbers collect.

Flocks of migrants begin arriving at most breeding locations between mid-February and early March. Males arrive on breeding grounds about one week before females. Pair formation begins as soon as females arrive and involve mutual displays and flights between a single female and multiple males.

Once amassed, grackles communicate with body motions as well as with sounds. Males, which are slightly larger than females to begin with, stand tall and are noticeably larger than the females. They have three types of physical communication that are observable.

- The **Bill-Up Display** is a threat display and consists of upward movement of the head so that the bill is almost vertical. It is given by a male in response to the approach of another male. Occasionally the Bill-Up Display is given to members of the opposite sex early in the breeding season when individuals are unmated. Paired birds never per-



form this display to one another.

- The **Song-Spread Display** is given with the song by males and females by raising contour feathers and spreading the tail. It is more intense early in the breeding season, and the male Song-Spread Display is more intense when given in response to another male.

- The **V-Tail Display** is most often given by a male when approaching or leaving another male and is also performed after the Bill-Up Display. This display consists of spreading the tail feathers into a keeled V with exaggerated flapping of the wings.

Vocal displays are equally distinctive and fall into one of five categories.

- **CHACK** is a harsh, sharp call given by both sexes, often when alarmed or when arriving or leaving any event. It is also used to maintain vocal contact.
- **CHAA-CHITIP** is another harsh call, but more prolonged. It is often given by the female when taking flight or approaching another grackle.
- **BRRT** is a distinctive call with a nasal quality, given only by males.
- **SEE** is a prolonged, high-pitched clear whistle that accompanies both male and female precopulatory displays.
- **READLE-EAK** is the basic song but is highly variable among individuals. It is often described as sounding like a rusty gate. Each bird creates one individually distinctive song type, perhaps to establish the singer's identity.

The male sings most around the date of the first copulation; then, singing de-

creases steadily through incubation.

As the pair nests, the male remains close to the female by perching nearby, following her, and participating in mutual displays. In short, he guards her.

This attentiveness remains high throughout nest building and egg laying, but it decreases during incubation.

In Florida, egg laying may begin as early as the first week in March or may be as late as July. From one to seven eggs are laid and the female incubates for about two weeks.

Eggs hatch in succession but feeding begins when the first egg hatches. Both sexes feed young by forcing food into their mouths.

Young typically depart the nest around two weeks after hatching but remain near the nest for several more days. Adults continue to feed the young for several weeks.

Grackles are very flexible in feeding behavior. The diet is about 70-75% plant seeds and fruits during non-breeding. Insects and other animal foods become dominant during the breeding season. Fish are locally important foods when nesting occurs near bodies of water, and grackles will wade into shallow water to catch live fish. They will also consume eggs and nestlings from other passerine nests.

Adults respond to predators in nesting areas by mobbing, chasing, or diving at the predators, including humans. Primary predators are squirrels and raccoons which eat eggs, rat snakes which eat nestlings, and domestic cats which eat the young. Remains of grackles have also been found in the stomachs of Northern Harriers, Cooper's Hawks, and Great Horned Owls.

FAST FACT: Common Grackle fossils have been dated to the Pleistocene era and been found from Florida to Ontario.