

OBSERVING THE GRACKLES

It can be a lonely life – writing about grackles, that is. That thought came to me one day when I realized that I had begun to notice the similarities between the grackles and some of my human encounters. I've decided to leave those musings, though, to those who think more deeply than I do.

After suspending my bird feeding operation for a period of time until I could get the fire ants under control, I began anew in March. Not that the March timetable had any particular significance because the fire ants were still there. I kill one mound and they move six feet over and start another one. But it came about partially by chance.

One morning I had a hankering for a popcorn breakfast. I opened the pantry door and pulled out a box of microwavable packets from the back. I don't know why, but I happened to check the expiration date on the box. That is something that I would never even remotely think to do, but I did (perhaps some divine influence). It expired five years ago. Not having been previously concerned

with the nutritional degrading of outdated popcorn, I decided the birds probably wouldn't care about such matters. So, I popped a bag, took it outside, and spread it around on the grass. It took about an hour for anyone to notice, but the grackles eventually came and devoured my offering. Now they sit on the fence and squawk if I haven't met the need for their 8:00 am and 5:00 pm feedings.

I soon ran out of the outdated popcorn, so securing a reliable source within economic parameters for their ravenous appetite became a concern. Again, perhaps some divine influence convinced the local grocery store to always have a BOGO of some brand every week. The squawking fence-setters have developed a cosmopolitan attitude to all the brands being offered, but I have noticed a nuanced preference for the Movie Theatre Butter variety.

It usually begins with "The Scout". A big male with a twisted tail feather arrives first to survey the offering of the day, He will then converse with his fellow aviators and let them know that dinner is served. I have noticed, though, that he eats a

fair amount himself before he begins his scouting report.

Once the word is out, they begin flying in from east, west, north, and south. Sometimes they glide in solo from a hundred yards away, silently approaching like a stealth bomber. Other times, it is like an entire squadron descending in mass. Occasionally, one will come in with a mockingbird doggedly pursuing him.

When two big males arrive at the same time, they begin the ritual of male dominance. With necks thrown back and heads held high, they stretch out their wings and begin to strut their stuff. It is only after they realize that while they were dancing, the females were sneaking around and eating all the popcorn. Then it's like an afterthought, "Maybe this isn't as important as we thought it was." Back to the popcorn. More timid members of the flock then snatch a kernel and fly off with it.

There can be an eerie silence sometimes when all are eating, but when I hear a lot of squawking, I usually know what's up. Over to the side are all the young grackles with their urgent

pleadings to be fed. Mother grackles then take a small fragment from a kernel and feed their young. As soon as the young grackles have swallowed those small fragments, they begin flapping their wings and squawking again saying, “More, Mom. More.”

Arriving home after an early morning errand, I found twenty grackles on our roof and twenty or so on the neighbor’s roof. I’m guessing they were from different clans, but everyone seemed to be in good spirits. They were all talking away, and since the language app on my smart phone didn’t have grackle in its database, I had to guess what they were saying.

“When does this diner open?”

“It should be any time now. I just saw him come home.”

It’s been so hot lately – the heat index averaging about 105 to 110. I try to limit going outside as much as I can, but I did have to make a run to the mall for something the other day. The mall only seemed moderately busy, but there were dozens of

mall walkers taking advantage of the air conditioning. What's the saying? "Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the intense midday sun."

I slipped into the pet store to buy some cat food for our spoiled feline when I came upon their bird food aisle. There were dozens and dozens of mixes and blends specially formulated to attract colorful songbirds to your garden. I did not find one bag of anything designed to attract grackles.

Heading back to my car, I took the long route which allowed me to walk in the shade most of the way. I passed by two big live oak trees that were alive with birds. They chirped in harmonious unison sending their utmost thanks heavenward to God for giving them the shade of the mighty oaks.

Fascinated, I looked up to see what kind of birds they were. For a moment I thought, "Oh, it's only a bunch of grackles."