



Buccaneer Birds?

THE GREAT-TAILED GRACKLES OF GALVESTON

By Maria Adolphs

Maybe you have seen them too, flying in around dusk each day converging on the wires that crisscross 61st and S streets in Galveston. You can definitely hear them—a raucous mix of screeches, clicking and whirring resembling sci-fi robots, car alarms, and power tools. I've seen them several times and have been amazed at the sheer number of birds and each time wondered what are they doing? Why are they gathering here?

My husband, daughter and I had a few theories: Perhaps they are attracted to this spot because of a race memory—something hardwired in their DNA, their habitat destroyed long ago and where once stood ancient trees, now stand electrical wires and blinking lights. Or is it that the wires give off heat in the winter to warm them? Or maybe, an even more ominous thought—they are plotting world domination and are monitoring our every move. I finally gave into my curiosity and consulted bird expert Jim Stevenson of The Galveston Ornithological Society, and he assures me it is none of those reasons. In a phone interview, Stevenson happily filled me in on what these birds are up to.

These birds are Great-tailed Grackles, not to be confused with the Boat-tailed Grackle, who prefer salt and fresh water marshes. Galveston is home mainly to the Great-tailed Grackle. You'll notice two distinct sizes of Great-tailed Grackles up on the lines: the males are bigger and have iridescent black feathers and an oversized tail (hence the name) and the females are smaller and have feathers that are several shades of brown. There also may be a few Starlings mixed in as well.

Grackles? Wait a minute, are these the same birds that use my parked car as their blank canvas, creating Jackson Pollack-like works? These avifauna with attitude that boldly announce their presence? The same birds that pillage and plunder my dog's food, as she apprehensively obliges, the bullyragging birds that dive-bomb my garden finding the mother-load of booty for the taking?

The Great-tailed Grackles come to this intersection to roost. They prefer an urban setting because the light allows them to see night time predators, such as the Cooper's Hawk. The flock will know to change location if a hawk starts picking them off, but usually, they stay in the same area. They begin to gather in the early afternoon, and as the skies darken, their numbers increase and their songs amplify. Although the sounds they make are peculiar and not particularly musical—a cacophony of chi chi chi's, nee no, nee, no's, and wupppp wupppps, Great-tailed Grackles are considered songbirds. The males can be seen gyrating their bodies, spreading their wings out and bending over emitting a call to attract females or to stake his territory. Finally settling in to sleep, from dusk to dawn, hundreds of Grackles occupy the wires. Upon first light, they shout, Show a leg! And are raring to go to a pet dish or bird feeder near you.

Great-tailed grackles originally came from Central America and had spread as far north as Kansas, where open cultivated fields abound. They traveled up the Texas coast from the South and are now considered permanent residents of Galveston. Just as pirates established colonies on Galveston long ago, so too did the Great-tailed Grackles, claiming the island as their own. They are omnivores and have an indiscriminating palate, from french fries, discarded bait to pet food and insects. They often are found eating from bird feeders meant to attract more "desirable" birds, and they can't resist a newly seeded lawn, which provides all the nutrients they need.

These activities often give them their "bad boy" (and girl) reputation. They are "borderline" nuisance birds as compared to pigeons, house sparrows, and starlings because they are considered more of a native bird now. The Common Grackle, found in central and eastern United States, however, cause more problems, as they have learned to eat the eggs of birds and baby birds. In time the Great-tailed Grackles may learn to as well. The aggregation of Great-tailed Grackles on 61st and S, and other parts of the island is impressive, often turning the skies black as they make their approach to their spots on the wires and streetlights. Agricultural fields and human activity have allowed their population to proliferate, without the benefit of being preyed upon by various predators. Although the Great-tailed Grackle population was significantly diminished after Hurricane Ike, it did not take long to repopulate. Like their hardy human counterparts, and other fauna whose habitats were decimated, who quickly pushed aside the mountains of wreckage, and began again.

I asked Stevenson if there is concern that human activity is disrupting habitats for the many different species of birds that call Galveston home. He said that the vast majority of birds are protected by state and federal laws. "The government sees the birds as being here first—a rather enlightened way to look at it," says Stevenson. "We are also very fortunate here on Galveston Island to have many good areas set aside for birds and bird-watchers." I never gave bird-watching much thought until I talked with Stevenson, in fact, I thought it was an activity to do when you retire. But I must admit, I find myself looking up more often, scanning the skies with attentive ears, more aware of my surroundings, noticing every bird that happens my way, and I can now see the attraction. Sometimes it just takes a question to change your perspective.

To find out more about birds and other wildlife on Galveston Island: The TCEQ has published an informative brochure about the Galveston Bay Estuary—where "8,000 acres of wetlands and other habitats have been saved through preservation and restoration efforts". (www.tceq.texas.gov/publications/gi/gi-342.html/at_download/file). Birds and birdwatchers alike flock to Galveston for the spring migration and *Featherfest—Galveston Birding and Nature Photo Festival* which takes place April 9-12, 2015, in which many rare species of birds can be spotted (galvestonfeatherfest.com). An excellent guide for bird-watchers can also be found at galveston.com/birding. To learn more about birds and other wildlife found on Galveston check out the book *Bird Life of Galveston* by Jim Stevenson, which features big color pictures and biological information, or visit The Galveston Ornithological Society at galvestonbirders.org.

Works Cited

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