

FEATURES



THE TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

Learning to live with your blackbirds

By KRIS SOOKDEO

SO there you are, walking along the pavement and minding your own business when it hits you. Literally. A bullet of black feathers gently clipping you

as you walk past an otherwise unremarkable bush. Or perhaps this was not your first encounter and, wise to this peril, you had your umbrella or briefcase ready to defend yourself? While you might have some other

choice names for them following such an encounter, their accepted common name is the carib grackle (*Quiscalus lugubris*). Locally, however, most people simply call them blackbirds.

The name is a fitting description as an adult male bird does indeed appear black when observed at a distance or in poor light. However, they also possess a beautiful glossy purple sheen which is visible in proper light. Female and immature birds are dark brown in colour. If you observe an adult grackle in flight you will notice that it tilts its tail to the side so that it looks like a rudder. This results in another of its local names — the boat-tail.

They are found in a range of environments including farmlands, residential and urban settlements, marshes, swamps and coastal sites. They are not found in forested areas, however. Outside of TT, the carib grackle can be found in northern South America and the Lesser Antilles.

Their flexibility in habitats is partly due to their omnivorous diet, as grackles will eat insects and other invertebrates, fish, grains and cooked foods.

Carib grackles are members of the Icteridae family, a group which also includes such notable species as the cornbird and plantain birds (oropendolas and orioles to the birders). There is also a close relative — the shiny cowbird locally called the singing angel which might be confused by some for a carib grackle.

The typical call of a carib grackle is usually a single note. Male birds, however, are capable of a lovely series of undulating notes which are accompanied by a brief display in which the feathers are ruffled and wings are held slightly open while the tail is held aloft and the whole bird tips forward!

The name blackbird is often encountered in the stories and songs from our childhood and you might imagine these to be the same birds. However, the English, the source of many of these stories, have a different bird which goes by the name blackbird. Their blackbird is actually a species of thrush and is related to our big-eye grebe (spectacled thrush).

While we have a responsibility to safeguard all our wildlife, it is understandable why our blackbirds can become a bit of a public nuisance sometimes. There are two reasons for this. According to the *A Guide to the Birds of TT* by Richard french (THIS IS CORRECT), blackbirds nest during two periods of the year May-September and again from November to February. Like most birds, they will look for a safe tree to nest in. However, because carib grackles often live in urban areas, their search for trees often takes them to parks, gardens or other beautified public spaces. They love a nice, isolated tree which provides a safer nest site than a dense grove of trees. Look outside. Those single trees in the car park will do nicely!

If you happen to approach a blackbird which has a nest or baby birds to defend, it will do just that. Of course, the damage is insignificant and more danger is probably posed by people panicking and running away than by the birds themselves.

Our problem with blackbirds does not end there. Those trees also provide nice, roosting sites and a large flock of birds in an urban setting will congregate in the evening at a favourite tree to sleep. The noise can become unbearable and the sight and smell of the droppings only add to the problem.

● BLACKBIRD continues on Page 18B

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FEATURES



THE carib grackle or blackbird. PHOTO BY NIGEL LALLSINGH

Keeping them away?

● BLACKBIRD from Page 16B

How can you get rid of grackles safely? Unfortunately it isn't always easy and will require effort. Nesting birds will eventually fledge their young and move on but roosting birds can make visiting your garden in the evening a long-term habit. The key is to make the birds feel unsafe there.

Regular use of small firecrackers, banging pans or loudspeakers can work if used in short, sharp bursts rather than long extended periods. The same applies to the use of bright lights and scarecrows. A physical barrier such as a fine mesh can be used if the tree is suitably sized.

Trimming the tree to remove the leafy branches and make the roost more exposed is a relatively simple

yet effective solution. Sometimes, frustrated land owners resort to cutting the tree down although this is rarely desirable.

But as far as is possible, we should learn to live alongside these characterful birds and appreciate that they make up part of our varied and fascinating biodiversity. As more and more communities become urbanised, we should cherish any link we have to our native wildlife. Even if it means having to dodge one of these dive-bombing birds!

For more information on our natural environment contact the T&T Field Naturalists' Club at admin@tfn.org, our website at www.tfn.org, Facebook and YouTube pages.

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WHERE: ST. CLAIR

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WHEN: Thursday 9th July, 2015
9:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

WHY: To upgrade and maintain the overhead line system in these areas.

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