

(Jeff Lemons)



Icteridae the BLACKBIRDS, GRACKLES, COWBIRDS, MEADOWLARKS, and ORIOLES

There are 105 species in the family Icteridae distributed throughout the New World. Twenty-five of these species have been documented in North America. Of these twenty-five, 15 species have been documented in the Carolinas and 13 of these have been confirmed present in the Central Carolinas. Eleven of these 13 birds are presented in detail below. The other two, the Yellow-headed Blackbird and Scott's Oriole, are discussed in the Supplementary Bird List.

Large flocks of “blackbirds” are commonly encountered foraging in open fields in the Carolinas outside of breeding season. Many of these flocks are made up of a mix of species that could include blackbirds, grackles, cowbirds, meadowlarks, and often non-Icterids like European Starlings and American Robins. The males of many of these species are mostly black in color. All of these birds are omnivores that feed on seeds, grain, and insects during the winter months. Blackbird flocks will usually spend their days moving about open fields feeding on the ground and then spend the night in a large communal roost under cover of dense foliage.

During the twentieth century, winter blackbird flocks estimated up to millions of birds were present in the grain fields of the Piedmont and Coastal Plain throughout the southeastern United States. Many of these birds had moved south from their breeding grounds far to the north. In 1966, a single flock in the Dismal Swamp was estimated to contain 20 million blackbirds (including starlings). In 1975, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated one roost in Hertford County, North Carolina, at 50 million birds. Smaller roosts of 2 million; 500,000; 350,000; and 315,000; were estimated in Alamance, Union, Mecklenburg, and Forsyth counties, respectively, that year. Farmers often considered these “hordes of blackbirds” to be destructive to their crops.

In addition to the standard “scarecrow” and shotgun, a variety of other blackbird control measures have been employed over the past 100 years. Both the state and federal government hired and trained staff to continually educate farmers about the latest and most efficient control measures. In the 1960s, farmers in Anson County used a mix of scare tactics including “firecracker ropes” and other noise makers to protect their milo crops. In 1970, a single flock in Scotland County estimated to be three million birds made national news for its size and the destruction it caused. At night, the roosting flock was estimated to cover the entire extent of a 40 acre forest and their extensive accumulation of droppings was believed to be killing the trees. Guns and loud noises were used against them. Today, exclusion netting, habitat modification, scare tactics, repellents, bird-specific toxicants, trapping, and shooting are all still employed when crops are threatened. Many of these measures can be employed by permit only.