

Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula*



Folk Name: Purple Grackle, Crow Blackbird, Jackdaw

Status: Resident

Abundance: Common to Abundant

Habitat: Pine woods and dense woods for nesting or roosting; forages in croplands, fields

The Common Grackle is indeed a common to abundant bird throughout the Carolina Piedmont. At 12 ½ inches, it is the largest member of the blackbird family found here. The larger Boat-tailed Grackle is only found along the tidewater region of the Carolinas. Historically, the Common Grackle was known as the “crow blackbird” or “Jackdaw” throughout the Piedmont, and like other blackbirds, it was often a target of persecution before it finally received legal protection.

“The crow blackbird has no peace at the hands of man, yet a flock of them in a short time will clear a newly planted field of all its hosts of destructive larvae that the plough turns up. ...Neither the blackbird nor the crow cares as much for corn as it does for grubs, and if farmers would scatter corn about their fields instead of putting up scarecrows and the like, those misunderstood birds would never pull up a hill of his planting”

—*The Charlotte Democrat*, October 26, 1894

The Common Grackle has a long keeled tail and a thick, powerful bill. Adult males are an iridescent purple-bronze color on their body, and they have a purple to blue-green head. Females are a less iridescent black color overall. Both adults have pale yellow eyes. These birds are quite gregarious, nesting together in small groups during breeding season and roosting together in very large numbers in the winter. They are known for their cacophony of harsh calls and their loud hoarse voices.



Common Grackle. (Jim Guyton)



They are a permanent resident throughout the Piedmont.

The breeding status of the Common Grackle in the Carolina Piedmont during the nineteenth century is unclear. It was not known to breed in the South Carolina Piedmont, and its breeding in the North Carolina Piedmont into the early twentieth century was designated very “local.” By the end of the twentieth century, however, the Common Grackle was considered the most abundant breeding bird throughout South Carolina and one of the most abundant in North Carolina outside of the mountains. Today, the continental population is believed to be in serious decline. Despite this decline, they are still a common breeding bird and flocks numbering in the many thousands are still a common sight during the winter months.

Leverett Loomis collected multiple specimens of the Common Grackle during his time in Chester. He reported that it was “said to breed” but provided no other evidence or confirmation. In fall and winter, Loomis observed grackles “often associated in great droves with Red-wings, Cowbirds, and Rusty Grackles.” He became especially interested in collecting specimens of the “Bronzed Grackle,” a western subspecies, and finally succeeded in his efforts on November 5, 1887, when he collected a male from a flock of Common Grackles. On November 21, 1887, he collected multiple specimens of the “Bronzed” subspecies from “an immense assemblage in the neighborhood of Chestnut Grove in the northern part of Chester County.”

Maurice Stimson indicated the Common Grackle was not known as a breeding bird in Iredell County prior to about 1920, but by 1931, they were a common breeding bird in the area. In a letter to C.S. Brimley at the North Carolina State Museum he wrote: "I notice Purple Grackle is only a winter visitor with you. Far as twelve years ago the Crow Blackbird was not known here but they are quite common about town in summer now. Cedar trees, large trees covered with English ivy seem to be favorite nesting sites. One nested in my yard 3 years ago in a cedar tree. He leaves us in October." William McIlwaine recorded a flock of 50 Common Grackles in Charlotte on February 26, 1929. He designated them a "common summer resident" and a local breeding bird. He noted grackles present from 4 February through 6 November.

In 1939, C.S. Brimley made a public request for nesting records of grackles for the second edition of the book *Birds of North Carolina*: "We badly need records of Purple Grackle; we know it breeds spottily all over the State but can cite few actual localities at present." William McIlwaine responded that (unfortunately) he had no dated nest record of Purple Grackle in Charlotte and Elizabeth Clarkson responded that they were "seen all through the summer, though I have not found a nest." Dr. John Grey, a founder of the North Carolina Bird Club, provided observation dates of breeding Common Grackles in May and June 1940 in the Town of Davidson. Charlie Sellers recorded Common Grackles in town the first week of March and staying as late as 2 December in 1939. In 1941, he noted that this species was an "abundant" breeding bird in Charlotte.

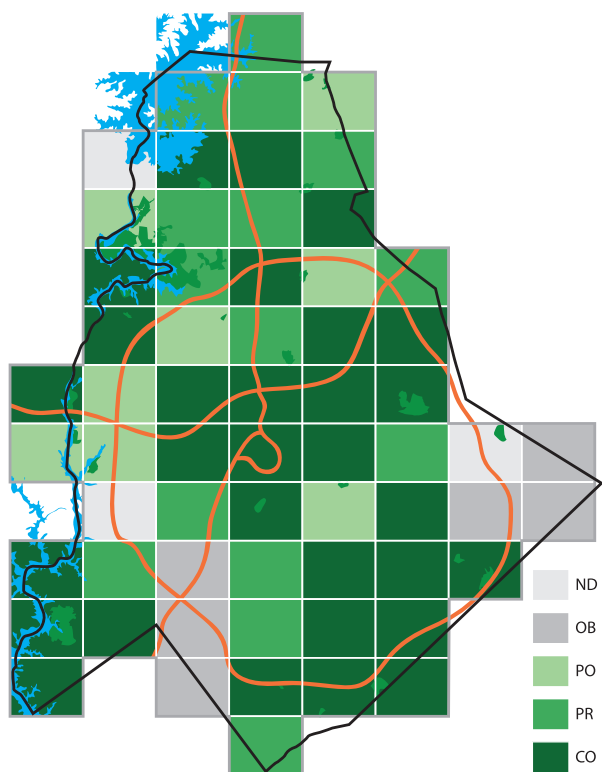
Becky Norwood published this account from Charlotte:

On May 14, 1957, we fell heir to an orphan Common Grackle, estimated to be more than a week old. This being a new experience for my husband and me, we thought we could feed him (or her) about a week and then release him. What a surprise we had! It was not until June 15 that we decided that Chisolm (thus we had named him) could fend for himself. During those weeks we had fed him, in various combinations, the following: hard-cooked egg yolk, bread crumbs, corn bread, corn meal, grits, peanut butter, milk, buttermilk, cottage cheese, Dash dog food, lettuce, carrots, beans, nasturtium leaves, grain, fish, worms, and grub worms. At first I had to put the food in his mouth, using a miniature wooden paddle. During the week of June 2–8, he occasionally took food with his beak without it being pushed down his throat; during his last week of captivity he fed himself exclusively—mainly because I knew he could and therefore declined to put any food in his mouth. I merely held the food out to him or left some in a jar lid for him to help himself. How he did squawk. We even bought cod liver oil for him to prevent any vitamin deficiency

due to lack of sunshine.

From the beginning, I would coax him to drink by putting his bill in some water. He even took baths in the shallow water provided for that purpose. We kept him in a cage in our garage at first and later gave him free run of the garage. By May 20 he was flying short distances. In fact he spent that very night in a treetop to which he had flown and from which I could not retrieve him. The next morning I coaxed him down and caught him. Much of the time he would fly to the rafters of the garage, and with the aid of a stepladder I had to climb after him at feeding time. He gradually connected my arrival with food and learned to fly down when I entered the garage.

The day of his release Chisolm was banded by my husband as a proxy for Harry T. Davis, State Museum, Raleigh, North Carolina. The next day we had to coax quite a lot to entice him down to feed him. However, on the third day, he immediately flew down when he heard the back door open and saw me emerge with food. This continued for about a week. Then he gradually began to learn to forage for himself. This was good news for us because we wanted him to be independent of human beings. Now, after almost four weeks of freedom, he seems to have reverted completely to the wild. He does not



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Nearly Ubiquitous (PR/15, CO/30)

respond in any way when we “kuk” to him as we did in the days of captivity. We see him occasionally in our yard, the last time being today (July 12) when he both drank water at the birdbath and foraged around in the grass for insects and bugs. He sometimes comes to our feeding station for grain. He has grown some beautiful new iridescent feathers, on wings and head in particular, but his tail is somewhat ragged. Since he had to be fed

every hour at first, we learned first-hand that one should not take lightly the responsibility of raising a baby bird.

Volunteers with the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas confirmed the Common Grackle is one of the top 20 breeding birds in the county. Despite well documented population declines nationally, it has apparently tolerated the rapid growth of this urban area quite well. Breeding evidence indicates Common Grackles wintering in SC “breed largely in the area south of Maryland. Those wintering in NC come from more northern regions, including the New England states.”