

Grackles Catching Fish

by
Jean Iron

On Sunday, 8 June 1997, Ron Pittaway and I took the new ferry from Toronto to Port Dalhousie to assess its fall pelagic prospects. We continued on the Niagara River extension to the "sand piles" at Queenston. Shortly after the ferry entered the Niagara River, we noticed Common Grackles (*Quiscalus quiscula*) flying out from shore over the water, sometimes half-way across the river and back. At the famous Niagara "fly-past" spot, we decided to study one grackle as it made its sortie straight out over the river. About 100 metres off shore, it hovered about two to three metres above the water in tern-like fashion for several seconds. Then it flew down, scooped something silvery out of the river and, with the item dangling from its bill, flew directly to an area of shrubs and trees on the shore. We determined the silvery item to be a small fish or minnow that the grackle was possibly taking to its young.

As we travelled, we saw about 25 Common Grackles fishing over the river and returning to shore with a shiny fish in their bills. On examining the surface of the water we saw many stunned or dead minnows being carried along by the current. Because we were downstream from Sir Adam Beck Generating Station, we thought the fish may have died or been stunned as a result of going through the turbines.

A search of the literature revealed

that grackles feeding on fish is well documented and that fish can be part of the diet of grackle nestlings. Follett (1957) describes grackles fishing for River Emerald Shiners (*Notropis atherinoides atherinoides*): "On June 18, 1944, at Niagara Falls, Ontario, opposite the American Falls, thousands of slender fish approximately three inches in length formed dense shoals near the surface of the clear water. An occasional dead or dying fish, its white belly turned upward, floated conspicuously at the surface. The shoals were concentrated chiefly below a rocky point and in an eddy at the boat landing. Several Bronzed Grackles walked about on numerous small bits of driftwood floating in the eddy. As I watched, a grackle seized one of the slender fish and flew off, the bright silver body of the fish hanging from the bird's beak." On the Cayuga Lakes, New York, Hamilton (1951) observed that Common Grackles salvaged dead alewives (*Alosa pseudoharengus*) along the shores and fed them to their nestlings.

Grackles also take live fish. In Michigan, Beeton and Wells (1957) reported a female Common Grackle taking seven live Lake Emerald Shiners (*Notropis atherinoides acutus*) and carrying them to the same tree. Not one was eaten by the adult. "One of the minnows was seen wriggling in the bird's beak, and there seems no

doubt that the other minnows were alive also, since no dead ones could be seen floating on the surface. . . The bird flew back and forth eight to ten feet above the water, then upon sighting the minnow it dipped down, hovered immediately above the fish and captured it with a quick thrust of the beak. The grackle appeared to be very adept at catching the minnows; it was not observed to miss a capture and got only its breast feathers wet during the procedure." This method of catching fish was similar to the one we observed the grackles use on the Niagara River.

In *The Birds of North America*, Peer and Bollinger (1997) state that fish may be an important dietary item of Common Grackles living near large bodies of water and that to capture its prey, the Common Grackle "wades into shallow water (or hovers above the water) and captures live fish with its bill".

In conclusion, Common Grackles

Jean Iron, 9 Lichen Place, Don Mills, Ontario M3A 1X3

are opportunistic feeders that will take advantage of an available food source. They are skilled at fishing for live and dead fish. It will be interesting to look in other locations for Common Grackles using this feeding behaviour.

Acknowledgements

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Literature Cited

- Beeton, A. M. and L. Wells.** 1957. A Bronzed Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) feeding on live minnows. *Auk* 74: 263-264.
- Follett, W.I.** 1957. Bronzed Grackles feeding on Emerald Shiners. *Auk* 74: 263.
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- Peer, B.D. and E.K. Bollinger.** 1997. Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 271 (A. Poole and F. Gill, editors). Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, and American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.

An Evening with Paul Lehman

A special presentation featuring "Migrant Hotspots of North America" by Paul Lehman, and "Identification of Longspurs" by Jon Dunn, will be held at 7 p.m. on Monday, 24 November 1997, at the Civic Garden Centre, Edwards Gardens, Toronto. This program is sponsored by the Toronto Ornithological Club, Birders Journal, and Ontario Field Ornithologists. A registration form will be in October's OFO NEWS.