

## Common Grackle

*Quiscalus quiscula*

The highly successful and adaptable Common Grackle is one of the more abundant and familiar of Vermont's breeding birds. The species' only habitat requirements appear to be open areas for foraging and open water in the form of a large stream, swamp, pond, or lake. Grackles are most abundant in open or semi-open farming country, somewhat less common in urban and suburban habitats, and least common in wild areas (where they resort to beaver ponds and meadows, natural lakes, marshes, and open bogs).

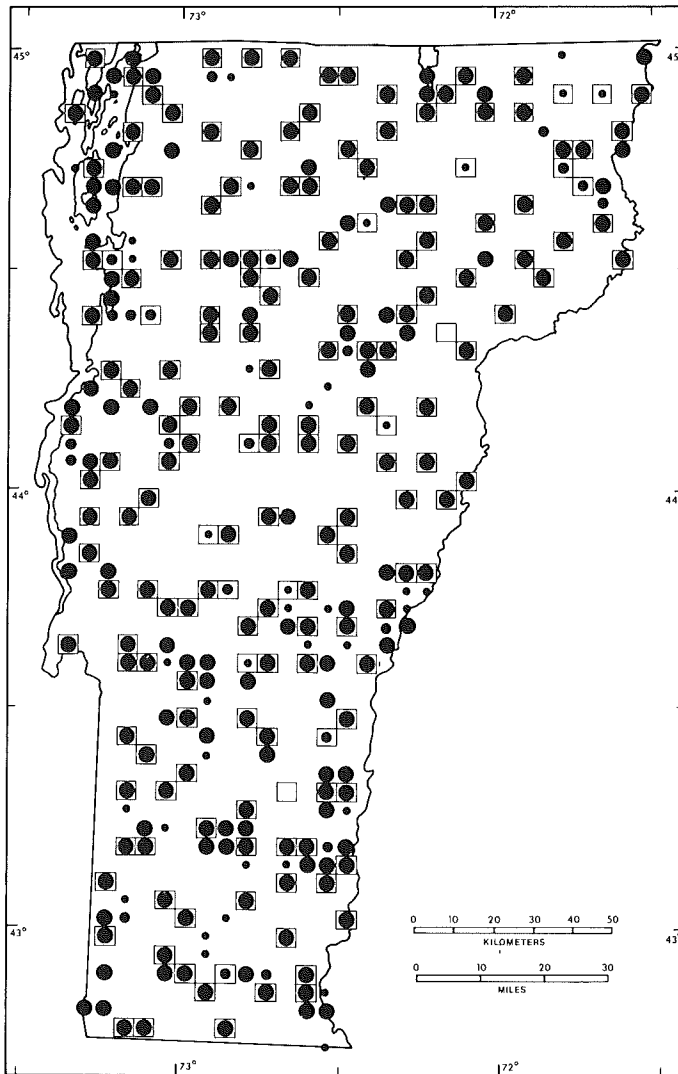
The Common Grackle is a large, noisy, and conspicuous bird. For these reasons it is usually easy to detect. Grackles are not territorial; they defend only the nest site, and away from the nest site they forage with other grackles. The species is often loosely colonial, which helps to locate breeding pairs. Behavioral clues to breeding include displays in which the males ruff out the feathers of their upper backs, necks, and breasts while emitting a grating squeak, or elevate the bill in what appears to be a gesture of snobbery. Both of these behaviors are thought to constitute competitive displays within courting groups consisting of four to five males and only a single female (Stokes 1979). Although occupied nests accounted for more than 24% of the Atlas Project confirmations of breeding grackles, confirmation was more easily obtained by locating large, squawking fledglings (21% of confirmations), or by seeing parents flying with food for their young (48% of confirmed breeding).

In Vermont the Common Grackle is one of the five or six earliest-returning passerines, appearing early in March or even in late February. Courting groups are formed and commonly seen during April, and nest building begins during the middle of April. The nest is a large, somewhat unkempt structure of grass and weed stems, the walls



of which are usually reinforced with mud and lined with soft fibrous matter. There are eight reports of nests with eggs for Vermont, with dates ranging from April 30 to July 6. Grackles appear to be single-brooded; late nests probably represent renesting attempts. The number of greenish-blue eggs, which may be either spotted or blotched with dark marks, ranges from 3 to 7 per clutch; clutches of 4 and 5 eggs are equally common. Nestlings have been reported on nine dates from May 14 to July 13; 18 reports of recently fledged young date from June 5 to July 30. The greater part of the Common Grackle population departs for wintering areas in the south central states in October and early November. The few hardy individuals that attempt to overwinter are occasionally successful.

This species will nest almost anywhere. The outer branches of conifers provide preferred sites. In their analysis of 2,601 North American Nest Record Program cards at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Maxwell et al. (1976) found that more than 60% of reported grackle nests were located in conifers. In Vermont the species shows a distinct preference for stands of pine and ornamental spruce. Many nests are also located in deciduous trees and shrubs, especially willow and alder. More exceptional sites include cattails, buildings, bridges, cavities in trees and snags, and stumps sur-



**No. of priority blocks in which recorded**

TOTAL 177 (99%)

Possible breeding: 8 (5% of total)

Probable breeding: 9 (5% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 160 (90% of total)

**Physiographic regions in which recorded**

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	31	100	17.5
Green Mountains	54	100	30.5
North Central	18	95	10.0
Northeast Highlands	16	100	9.0
East Central	19	100	11.0
Taconic Mountains	16	100	9.0
Eastern Foothills	23	96	13.0

rounded by water; in Tinmouth, Vermont, a nest was found in a mailbox. Nest placements range from within 0.3 m (1 ft) of the ground to a height of 18.3 m (59 ft) (Harrison 1978; Atlas Project data).

The Common Grackle is distributed throughout the state; it was found in 99% of the Atlas Project priority blocks. These birds are probably most abundant in the Champlain Lowlands, but they occur in large numbers in almost every other settled sector of the state. Grackles are scarce in remote portions of the Green Mountains and northeastern Vermont, but a few can

usually be found in swampy or marshy openings even in largely roadless areas. Historical data (Thompson 1842) indicate that the Common Grackle's status has not changed substantially for at least 130 years.

WALTER G. ELLISON