



NEWS FROM THE FLOCK

Mar 2022/ Issue 6

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Next Program

Thursday, 7:00
March 31
Yates 102
PSU Campus

**"Photographing
Birds"**
by Bob Gress,
Author,
Naturalist, &
Former Director
of Great Plains
Nature Center,
Wichita, KS

A Roost of "Blackbirds"

Bob Mangile

[This article started out as a quick report of a once in a lifetime experience to have a flock of some 200,000 birds roosting about 300 feet from my door. Regrettably, there seems too much of interest to omit; hence, this exhaustive report. Though it is not a strict scientific reporting, it is accurate enough to offer an idea of the function of a flock of grackles and starlings in a mixed roost. I hope it is of some interest to the reader. It seems that the mysteries of bird behavior are endless and rather than having answers to resolve the mysteries, we must simply tell others of what we see.]

The following account is given from personal observations, a few personal notes and recollection of events as they transpired from about the month of July 1992. Dates and time of the events being mentioned are approximate but are reasonably accurate.

During the month of July (1992), my wife and I watched from our patio swing, while starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) gathered every evening in a field some 150 yards directly north of our residence at 816 E. Atkinson Ave. in Pittsburg, Kansas. The bird's activities were made more visible by the setting sun's light from the West and the use of a spotting scope and binoculars. The growing flock was predominantly juveniles in brown plumage.

It is noteworthy to mention that this area is a regular roosting place for large flocks of blackbirds. Red-winged blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*), numbering in the thousands, annually roost within a quarter of a mile west of our residence during late winter and early spring.

When the starlings established a roost 50 to 75 feet from a large garage, across the street to the Northeast, it went mostly unnoticed. The roost is about 300 feet from our house, (across the street), in a 50 x 100 foot patch of trees about 30 to 40 feet high.

In time it was clear that the roost site began attracting common grackles (*Quiscalus quiscula*) as well as a few robins (*Turdus migratorius*) and house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*). With the passage of time the roost contained thousands of grackles and starlings and by the end of August there were perhaps some 200,000 birds; consisting of about 80% grackles and 20% starlings and several hundreds of house sparrows.

With the aid of a spotting scope it was observed that the house sparrows occupied the lower area from the ground to about eight feet, the starlings occupied the area mid-way up the trees and the grackles occupied the upper canopy.

The arrival of the birds during the August and early September evenings was of interest to the observer. About 6:30 P.M. to 7:00 P.M. the starlings began flying in from the feed fields. Large flocks arrived with many landing on the power lines all facing in one direction, usually facing into the direction of the wind. The brown juvenile plumage was beginning to transform into adult plumage. After much milling around they eventually entered the patch of trees to roost.

The grackles arrived later, about 7:30 P.M.; at first in small squadrons of less than 100 birds, soon followed by the large rivers of the returning flocks. Trying to describe what happens next without being poetic is nearly impossible. The endless flock would literally pour into the tops of the trees like a waterfall. How they managed to find a place to land quickly enough is mystifying. The birds arrived in a steady river for about 30 minutes and until mid-September there were two major arteries of the returning flock; i.e., from the Southeast and the Southwest. Later, at least one stream of returning birds begin arriving from a westerly direction.

(Cont. on Page 2)



Meeting Program Synopsis

Board Minutes...Megan Corrigan

NO BOARD MINUTES or Program TO REPORT

(BLACKBIRDS, Cont. from Page 1)

The cumulative calls from the gathering flock gradually grow to a 'single' scream. One attempt to make a recording was made by carrying a recorder beneath the roost as the darkness fell. What the human ear hears is not what is recorded. The recording sounded like running tap water through an aerated water faucet, with all sound gathered to create a loud static.

A loud noise, like the clapping of hands or the sound of a car horn, produces an instant secession of the vocalization of the flock and is followed immediately by the sound of thousands of wings flapping through the air. Perhaps, as with all flocking birds, the cooler fall temperature produces a more brittle disposition of the flock. Smaller events or sounds may trigger more explosive responses in the nervous flock than in warmer temperatures. At some point near darkness the sound seems to almost stop and the flock is at rest for the night.

Of particular interest is that until the end of summer, the grackles and the starlings returned separately and at different times. By October, both species returned in a mixed or homogenized flock and on the scheduling of the grackles (later rather than earlier). But the grackle's flight pattern had been modified in that the undulating pattern was replaced with a flight similar to that of the starling. Why the two species combine into one flock is a mystery? But it is relevant to mention that the starlings seem to have shifted their arrival time at the roost to that of the grackle. Whether or not they leave the roost together and fly to the same feeding places is unknown to me.

An effort was made to observe the morning exodus from the roost during early September. Shortly after dawn, the grackles began leaving in long continuous rivers of uniform density. At that time, they left in the two major directions from which they arrived during that period; i.e., southeast and southwest. Two steady streams, uniform in density, left the roost like clockwork. How the grackles knew which stream to follow and at what time to physically leap into the air to join the leaving birds is a mystery. Regardless, they leave the roost in a smooth, uniform movement the reverse of their arrival behavior.

Estimates are almost certainly incorrect. During the 30-minute early morning exodus the stream of grackles flying southwest passed over two trees separated by a distance of about 50 feet. With the application of "eye magic math" a count of about 100 birds were counted between the tops of these two trees at any one given time.

By estimating the passage of those 100 birds to be about five seconds, that gives a very conservative count of approximately 1200 birds a minute and they flew over for well over 30 minutes. This gives a conservative estimate of some 36,000 birds $(60/5) * 100 * 30 = 36,000$. With at least one other stream of estimated equal numbers leaving these two streams alone contained some 72,000 birds. Other birds flew in various group sizes and directions and at this time the flock was not yet at its peak in size.

In the reverse order of their arrival, the starlings leave after the grackles and their exodus was not observed to have a definable pattern, but estimated to be around 15,000 birds.

Vegetation beneath the roost was dung-covered and whitish, probably from the uric acid excreted in their droppings. The smell was not as noticeable as might be expected except after a rain or during the cool/damp evening or morning.

By October 5th the flock size seemed to have diminished in size and on the overcast, rainy evening of October 7th. their usual arrival time of around 7:00 P.M., found near darkness and the flock failed to return as they had over the past three months.

Comments: The rather rainy summer season delayed the early mowing of the hay fields nearby and after it was mowed and baled the earliest returning grackles covered the fresh-cut fields before going to roost. Also, large numbers would gather to drink from my small pond just south of the roost site. Surprisingly, very few sick, injured and/or dead birds were seen or found in the area but there were a few. Of particular interest was the fact that a Cooper's hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*) was observed on two occasions trying in vain to enter the wire fly pen of my pigeon cage in an attempt to get a pigeon. It would seem that the birds of the roost site, i.e., the strong, the weak or the injured would have offered a more accessible source of food for the hawk. ###

Treasurer Report...Liz Mangile

March 2022 Financial Report

Beginning Balance-----\$5607.50

Credits

Money from National-----\$65.00

Total-----\$ 65.00

Debits

Newsletter-----\$ 4.00

Total-----\$ 4.00

Ending Balance-----\$5668.50



Happenings in Southeast KS

SIGN OF THE TIMES

Steve Ford



Recently Cindy and I walked by one of our loblolly pine groves, now some twenty-five years old. As Kansas is one of only two states that does not have native conifers (the other is Hawaii), we never expected any reproduction from our planted loblollies, so were quite surprised to come across a couple of dozen young seedlings, maybe two or three years old! We were seeing pines reproducing in

Kansas! We were thrilled! Of course when this southern species planted itself the conditions of that particular site might well have been "perfect," and perhaps will not come again for another twenty-five years. Still, there's something else going on, and it caused our enthusiasm to dim a bit. We were seeing evidence of climate change. We are not thrilled about that.

It got us to thinking about other local evidence. Incursions of other southern species came to mind along with growth spurts of exotic invasives. On the recent Mined Land Christmas Bird Count we saw mistletoe and black vultures. Bradford pears have exploded in old fields and fence rows, including on our farm. Black gum too. Invasive weeds including *Sericea lespedeza*, Japanese and bush honeysuckle, teasel, and winter creeper have grown so abundant they are next to impossible to control without great effort and expense. Indeed they are out of control on most old mined land. Bald cypress trees at the PSU Natural History Reserve are reproducing at a rate we've not seen in our thirty-seven years in Kansas. Armadillos, quite rare when Cindy and I came here in 1985, are common, perhaps more so than opossums, themselves a southern species.

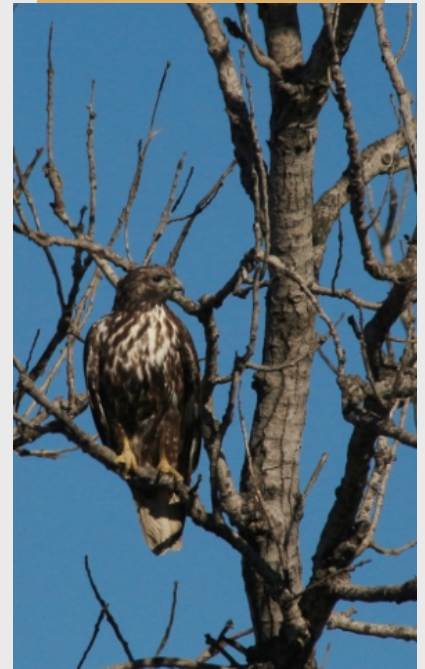
Probably not all these "irregularities," range expansions, and growth spurts can be laid directly at the feet of global warming - and certainly not all are bad, *per se*. None have the immediate devastating effects of forest fires and floods, or the longer term catastrophes of droughts, sea-level rise, species extinction, weather extremes, agricultural declines, social disruption, etc., etc., but, while we are fortunate to live in a region of the country wherein we don't yet suffer extremely, the signs of looming environmental hardship are here. Right here.

We now look at our reproducing loblollies with less of a smile.

Sightings...



EMMETT'S PICS



Harlan's Hawk

The Harlan's hawk is the dark phase of the red-tailed hawk. This one seems to come to the same tree every spring in Cherokee County.

Send your newsletter articles, bird sightings, and nature notes to C. Ford by April 10.

cford@gus.pittstate.edu

**Application for Membership
Sperry-Galligar Audubon Society**

For first-time National Audubon membership: send \$20.00 and become a member of both organizations, receive 4 copies of Audubon Magazine annually and 8 copies of Sperry-Galligar Newsletter. Please make your check to: National Audubon Society.

_____ Yes, I wish to become a **FIRST-TIME** member of National Audubon and Sperry-Galligar Audubon. (\$20.00)

For only local renewal membership, send \$15.00 for membership in Sperry-Galligar Audubon and receive the 8 newsletters per year informing you of all our local activities. Please make your check to: Sperry-Galligar Audubon.

_____ Yes, I wish to become a **RENEWING** member of the local chapter. (\$15.00)

Future National Audubon renewals: Send Audubon mailer forms directly to National Audubon Society.

Please print and mail to:

**Sperry-Galligar Audubon Society
816 E. Atkinson Ave.
Pittsburg, KS 66762**

Name _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip Code _____

Phone _____

e-mail _____

**Sperry-Galligar Audubon
Society**

Meetings are held the last Thursday of the month...7:00 p.m. to 9 p.m., Room 102, Yates Hall, PSU Campus, Pittsburg, KS.

No meetings in June, July, or August. (November/December meeting date to be announced.)

Sperry-Galligar Audubon Society
816 E. Atkinson Ave.
Pittsburg, KS 66762

Events & Etc.

DUES

Please pay your membership dues for this year...\$15

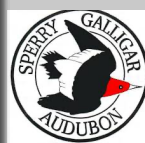
Support Sperry-Galligar Audubon with T-shirts, sweatshirts, and bluebird boxes for sale.

T-shirts: \$12.00

Sweatshirts: \$20.00

Bluebird Boxes: \$15.00

Time of year to clean out bluebird boxes. This will encourage bluebirds to nest in the boxes.



ATTENTION ALL MEMBERS. Pay membership dues in September. Please consider paying local membership dues. Our chapter receives 100% of the local dues only. You can subscribe to both local and national. Either way you get the newsletter.