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Style Publishing Group
P.O. Box 1676
Frisco, Texas 75034
Phone: 972.335.1181
Toll Free: 877.781.7067
Fax: 214.722.2313

E-mail: info@friscostyle.com
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photo by Chris Fritchie

For the Birds

By Lisa Birdsong

THE PRESTON/S.H.121 AREA of Frisco yields over four million square feet of retail shopping and restaurants – one of the highest concentration areas of retail per capita in the nation. It is truly a shopper's paradise and it's right in our backyard. Millions of dollars are spent each year by property owners to enhance the overall appearance and attract consumers to their retail centers. Yet there is one thing that can wreak havoc on all their efforts – birds. And the infestation can literally happen overnight.

On any given evening you can drive past an area restaurant, shopping center, gas station or grocery store and be overwhelmed by the immense number of birds perched above. Not the tuneful mockingbirds or colorful robins, but the obnoxious grackles. These medium-sized, blackish-brown creatures with green and purple iridescent feathers – often confused with blackbirds – flock by the thousands, swarming trees,

power lines, light poles and rooftops. The ever-increasing population of these birds in North Texas is often described as something out of a horror movie, particularly a Hitchcock film.

The grackle has a reputation of being a nuisance or pest bird. And what a pest it is! It earned this reputation by stealing food from other birds, being a scavenger and by damaging the areas it inhabits. These all-too-common birds form colonies and occupy areas lush with an ever-present food supply. Being omnivorous – a generalized feeder consuming both plants and animals – their diet consists primarily of insects, grains, seeds, smaller birds and food waste, the latter of which makes urban areas a preferred hang-out. It is also believed that freshly churned dirt, such as construction sites and farmland, attract the grackle for the unearthed seed and insect treasures. Given that much of North Texas consists of construction sites and agricultural fields, it's no

wonder these birds are commonplace in our area.

Farmlands can be distressed by the staggering amount of grackles and the damage they cause to crops. A tremendous grackle population often overwhelms communities and businesses. The flocking birds will cover trees with such intense numbers that a clap of the hands will send a dark cloud flying overhead. They will gather in parking lots overnight and form black pools of moving shadows more than thirty feet in diameter. The evidence of their existence is hard to ignore. Customers and store employees complain of the eerie birds and the filth they leave behind. Hundreds of dollars a day are spent cleaning up after them. Tree branches and shrubs are thickly covered with white droppings, almost as if they'd been purposely painted. The groundcover, also white as snow, will wilt and eventually die from the excessive amount of bird feces. Stop signs, light poles, building signs – nothing

is left untouched or undamaged. The constant exposure to the uric acid found in their fecal matter physically damages painted objects, shiny objects, plants and trees, and as a result, makes it impossible to maintain a clean environment.

People who frequent the infested locations, through employment or shopping, are concerned about the effects this could have on their health and are frustrated when their vehicles are peppered with an abnormal amount of bird droppings. The relentless noise made by the grackles can be unsettling and the presence of these creatures is not conducive with a pleasant shopping atmosphere.

Whenever these pesky birds flock to a certain area, the most commonly asked question is “Why?” Why are they attracted to this location? Unfortunately there is no simple answer. More than likely there are restaurants, roadway construction or open fields nearby. But the same could be true for the surrounding properties that aren’t as heavily impacted. So how does one solve something that isn’t fully understood? You do the most resourceful thing available in this day and age: Google it.

When you type the words “bird deterrents” in the most well-known search engine, you will find no less than 700,000 results. It seems a lot of people have a bird problem. There are hundreds of devices offering miraculous solutions, some more miraculous than others. You’ll find repellents, foggers, misters, spikes, nets, lights and electrical barriers, even holographic and sound devices. But that list doesn’t begin to scratch the surface of what is available to those who are in dire need of help. And, you won’t believe

the costs involved with each “cure.”

The objective with the more successful cures is to reduce the birds’ interest in a particular area in a humane and environmentally friendly way, without causing any harm to the birds. The first



photo by Chris Fritchie

step that all sources seem to agree upon is to interrupt their roosting pattern. Consistency is the key to this interruption. The birds’ natural instinct is to return at approximately the same time every evening, so the disturbance must occur as they’re settling in for the night. And with a little luck, the consistent disturbances will cause the majority of the colony to roost elsewhere.

One of the most cost effective and common bird deterrents used is an

artificial predator: snakes and owls. For good reason, imitation owls are more commonly used in public places than rubber snakes. You can find them perched along rooftops, tucked away in trees or peculiarly placed on signs and pedestals.

Interestingly enough, this apparatus does not intimidate grackles, as they are not preyed upon by owls. The owl does tend to deter the presence of other birds, like starlings and pigeons. But eventually the birds (even the daft pigeons) get wise and are no longer fooled by the immobile gadget. Consequently, the birds will fearlessly perch alongside an ineffective owl.

Another fairly inexpensive approach is knotted polyethylene or wire netting, which can be installed over openings to prevent birds from nesting. It is most commonly used under awnings, over signs or in decorative architecture. One of the primary benefits of this netting is its camouflaged appearance; it is no more obvious than a screen over a window.

Many businesses employ vendors to relocate the grackles by using laser light technology to spook them from the property.

The thin red lights travel a great distance, allowing good coverage without physically chasing the birds from perch to perch. While these lights prove effective at the time they’re being used, they do not appear to be a long-lasting solution. This procedure must be performed annually when the birds are in their heavy flocking season. Experts contend that the repeat performance each year will ultimately guide the winged-pests to an alternative roosting site. It does not seem to be the

most economical resolution given the cost associated with hiring a vendor to perform the annual task. However, it could be considered an interesting do-it-yourself project.

Sound devices are highly regarded bird deterrents. Sonic or ultrasonic bird repelling noisemakers have been used in cities across the nation. Squawkers can be found at bus stops, professional ball parks, rail stations and familiar shopping centers. The devices emit species-specific sounds, which include predator calls and distress cries, at intermittent times based on user programming. The sounds are broadcast in high decibels that are intended to imitate natural predators and drive the birds to a new roosting place. Laughably, the mechanical cries can cause unsuspecting bystanders to duck for cover, unsure of what looms overhead. The units seem to work as designed (on the intended targets), but like the artificial owls, birds will catch on to the deception. Therefore it is recommended to turn the systems off every few months in order to prolong their effectiveness.

Tree netting is becoming a more widely used tactic, even though it is one of the more expensive methods. This knotted mesh netting is designed to prevent birds from nesting within the comfort of the tree branches. It does not hurt nor injure the birds; it merely deters them from roosting. If properly installed, the netting will not thwart the trees' growth either.

For best results, the material should be left in place at least eighteen months to

insure that the birds "learn" not to return to this location. But netting trees is a lengthy and stressful process; it should not be done without understanding the responsibility involved. Each tree must be prepped and inspected before the netting can be applied. If a tree contains an active bird's nest, then it cannot be netted until the nest is abandoned. Applying the net material to a tree with an active nest will bring unwanted interest in your project from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, as well as animal activists.

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Recently, a high-profile shopping center netted more than eighty live oak trees to lessen the number of its returning birds. The property had been overrun with grackles for years, to the point that it was creating an undue hardship on the businesses within the center. Though it is not the most aesthetically pleasing answer, this successful method has been well-received by business owners and customers alike.

The rising number of grackles, and the

problems caused by them, has progressed so much that cities sometimes get involved and offer their assistance to areas suffering from an abundant population of the birds. Cities across the nation have been known to utilize many different resources to lighten their grackle inhabitants. The most recent example of local involvement occurred in February when the Denton Animal Control fired propane air cannons into the air every thirty minutes in an attempt to relieve the neighborhood of the overbearing pests. Unfortunately not all affected municipalities are convinced there's a need for their aid. But the good news is that there are many resources offered to those in need of help.

Without a doubt, there are an immeasurable number of solutions available to discourage the grackles from over-populating a region. Whether it's a public place or a personal home, a thorough assessment of the locale to be treated should help determine the deterrent best suited for the job. The most important tool to avoid spending excessive funds on temporary solutions is knowledge. The more you know, the better decisions you will make. But beware, without understanding the capacity and maintenance involved with a preferred method, you can quickly and easily throw money out the window. And that is for the birds.

Lisa Birdsong is a special contributor and area retail property manager.