

The Overbrook Grackle Roost

BY C. J. PECK

THE Overbrook Grackle Roost is situated upon the property of Mr. David L. Hess at the corner of Sixty-third street and Lansdowne avenue, Philadelphia. The estate comprises about ten acres, is rolling and wooded and has an artificial lake of about an acre in extent. The trees are deciduous with a goodly sprinkling of conifers and are of fair size. The roost has been in constant use for more than twenty years—how much more I have been unable to ascertain.

January.—Fewer birds use the roost during this month than at any other time of the year. On a few very severe nights the roost may be deserted, but such nights are rare and usually four or five hundred birds remain throughout the month.

February.—The first three weeks of the month are very similar to January, the number of Grackles varying from none to several hundred according as the weather is mild or severe. During the last week of the month the migration begins and the number of birds is considerably increased by early arrivals from the south. Probably five thousand birds use the roost during the last few days of February.

March.—The number of birds rapidly increases throughout the month until from twenty to twenty-five thousand are using the roost nightly.

April and May.—About April 15th, as the birds mate and nest-building begins, the numbers grow fewer and continue in a steady decline through the month. Comparitively few birds visit the roost in May, but the number never seems to fall below two or three thousand—birds which have not mated as yet or else males which have nests near by, probably both. Mr. Hunt's observations at Fifty-sixth and Jefferson streets seem to agree with and emphasize the above.

June.—June is very much like May except that very few

females visit the roost and towards the last of the month young birds begin to come in in company with the males.

July.—Most of the birds come to the roost as family groups during July. At this time of year they do not follow any regular lines of flight but come in from every direction, mostly flying low and often stopping to feed along the way.

August.—All this is changed soon after August 1st. The birds have for the most part completed their domestic cares and family groups are rapidly consolidated into large flocks which come to the roost from considerable distances. The numbers are very greatly increased and the birds in flying to and from the roost follow much more closely a regular well defined route.

September and October.—During September and October the greatest numbers are reached and the birds come in at night in great flights, one flock following another so closely as to give the impression of a single long-drawn-out flock. The flight begins about 5:30 p. m. and lasts for about twenty or twenty-five minutes, but scattered birds and small flocks continue to come in until dark. I believe that from fifty to seventy-five thousand birds visit the roost every night during these two months.

November.—The birds come regularly to the roost until they begin to go south about the middle of the month where two or three nights are sufficient to finish the large flights.

December.—Quite a number of birds remain over into December, probably double the number to be found in January but upon very cold nights they are quite likely to be entirely absent, returning again as soon as the weather moderates.

Robins use the roost to the number of one thousand or more, their numbers being hard to judge with any degree of accuracy on account of the way they mix with the Grackles.

On a visit paid to the roost on September 17th, I was surprised at the large number of birds which still showed marked evidence of the molt. While fully one-fifth of the birds lacked one or more flight feathers, this number was insignificant compared to the number showing faulty tails. Not over one-tenth of the birds observed had tails which could be called even approximately perfect.

Birds whose tails were fully developed seemed to have the

wing feathers equally perfect, but when the tails were only partly grown the wings might be equally backward or perfectly developed, depending, apparently, somewhat upon the growth of the tail, the wings reaching full size first.

About one-half the birds with imperfect tails had all the feathers present and of perfect form but one to one and one-half inches long; one-fourth had a short new tail like the above but with one or more of the old feathers sticking far out beyond the end of the new ones; while the remaining one-fourth had tails of every conceivable growth, many being without any tail at all.

All the Robins which I observed were in full plumage.*

No Red-wings have been known to visit the roost with the Grackles but several Screech Owls seem to be entirely at home there. I have heard as many as four calling at once and do not doubt that double this number might be found in the vicinity.

The following notes on the evening flights were taken September 17th:

5 p. m.—No birds in sight and none to be heard. Very few birds seem to remain near the roost during the day.

5:35 p. m.—A few small flocks are coming in, but not to any extent as yet. As they arrive they keep up a constant calling and shifting from tree to tree.

5:50 p. m.—A flock of 1,000 just arrived with a great deal of calling and commotion.

5:55 p. m.—Large flight now beginning from the northwest and birds are coming in, in a steady stream.

6 p. m.—Still larger flight from the northwest now begins. Birds continue to come in from both the flights already noted and also from a southwesterly direction. There are now probably 20,000 birds on the place.

6:10 p. m.—50,000 birds now here. They are continually shifting about in the trees and 1,000 to 1,500 are walking about on the lawn.

*Specimens that I have examined indicate that adult Grackles are later than the juvenal birds in completing their molt. Some secured October 22 have the tails only three-quarters grown. Old and young Robins molt about the same time in August and September, and are through earlier than the adult Grackles. Young Grackles, moreover, have a complete molt at this season, while young Robins do not molt the wing and tail feathers.—ED.

6:15 p. m.—3,000 birds on one small section of lawn. They do not seem to be feeding, merely waiting for darkness.

6:20 p. m.—The flight is about over and the birds are walking about on the lawn or flying about in the trees keeping up a continual clatter. There are a few Robins on the lawn with the Grackles but they are silent. Only rarely is a Robin heard.

6:30 p. m.—Only a few hundred birds now on the lawn and the birds in the trees are at least a little less noisy. As it grows darker under the trees the volume of sound grows gradually less. As the Grackles subside the Robins can be more plainly heard and at the present time (6:35) about five hundred are calling. They are scattered all about among the Grackles.

6:45 p. m.—Darkness and silence reign.

The gardener employed upon the place, informs me that after the storm of September 13th, he picked up over a peck of dead Robins—50 or 75 birds or about seven per cent. of the number then using the roost. Not one Grackle was found dead although they outnumbered the Robins nearly 100 to 1.

On the morning of October 2nd I had an opportunity of observing the birds of the northwestern flight as they left the roost. They flew as a single flock, stretching out in a long column from 50 to 100 feet wide and were ten minutes in passing over. There were no Robins in this flight. They leave the roost in small scattered flocks and in pairs, from fifteen to thirty minutes ahead of the Grackles.

December 18, 1905.—With considerable regret I am compelled by conditions at the roost to add this final observation, probably the last that will ever be made at this roosting site.

Extensive building operations accompanied by heavy blasting, and the reopening and enlargement of several quarries in the vicinity of the roost has had its inevitable result, and the Overbrook Grackle Roost as an extensive roosting site is a thing of the past.

These heavy blasts have left their mark upon the entire bird life of this vicinity. Numbers are much diminished and often the birds seem dazed and listless. I have several times picked up birds stunned by the concussion of some of the heavier shots and unhatched eggs have been very common the past two years