

The Concordville Robin and Grackle Roost

BY SAMUEL C. PALMER.

About four years ago a report was made at a meeting of the Club that the destruction of birds had been unusually great during a heavy storm in August. Among other reports there was one made by W. E. Hannum relating to the number of dead Robins and Grackles in a neglected nursery about one-half mile northwest of Concordville station, Delaware Co., Penna. About 120 Robins and Grackles were found dead under the trees which at that time were fit to be used as nursery stock. Since that time the number of birds roosting there has been greatly increased until to-day they number several thousand.

The location of this roost is on a high prominence sloping away to the north and south over rolling farm land for three or four miles in each direction. Numerous woods, orchards, and groves of trees are in sight, and there seems to be no scarcity of good roosting-places about the vicinity.

The west branch of the Chester Creek forks near Markham station about one mile distant, and one stream runs on the south about half-a-mile away while the one on the north is nearer.

The trees making up the roosting-place are chestnut and maple, chiefly the former. The maples form a double row of compact trees on the east side of the clump. The clump itself measures about 200 x 100 feet and the height not over twenty feet and nearly uniform.

The former roost of these birds was a wood a quarter of a mile to the southwest of this point. When a few years ago this wood was trimmed up and the underbrush cut out the birds left and apparently came to this neglected nursery. This old roost, according to old residents, had been in existence at least twenty-five years.

The days I selected to visit this roost, the 24th and 25th of

August, proved to be wet and disagreeable. An east wind with storm kept the sun back and rain was not infrequent. However I succeeded in getting some detailed memoranda of their arrival and departure.

My first glimpse of the roost was at 4.30 p. m. on the 24th, and at that time there were no birds in sight. A walk beneath the trees revealed no signs of feathers or dead birds to indicate the presence of enemies. At five o'clock no birds had appeared, and the first intimation that there would be any gathering came twenty minutes later, when two flocks of Grackles, numbering twenty and twenty-five birds, alighted in the tops of some spruce trees in a yard close by. A few stragglers followed, but in a few minutes all flew away together.

At 5.34 o'clock six Robins arrived, and at 5.50 o'clock two Cowbirds, the vanguard, settled in the trees. A little later two flocks of Grackles entered the roost. These did not as the first settle on the neighboring trees, but wheeled and alighted directly in the roost. Robins and Cowbirds continued to come in small scattered flocks, but the main arrivals were Grackles. The last of these noted arrived at 6.05 o'clock. Almost immediately the Cowbirds began to gather; the first flock of any consequence arriving at 6.06 o'clock, and numbering about fifty. Flocks of these birds continued to come until 6.30 o'clock, when only a few stragglers were to be seen. The Robins were now coming in increasing numbers from every direction, often at considerable height, until immediately over the roost, and then by a series of flight manœuvres settling either directly in the roost or on the trees and telephone wires close by. The Robins could be seen coming in loose, scattered flocks of eight to fifteen, or else singly, but never in compact flocks like the Grackles and Cowbirds, which, except for a few stragglers, came in flocks of 25 to 250.

On the next day the east wind was still blowing, the clouds were hanging low, and there was more rain. At 5.00 a. m. the Robins were chirping and beginning to leave the roost. A few minutes later a flock of Warblers was heard flying toward the south. I took my stand on the southwest corner, where I had a good view of the roost, and attempted to count the birds

as they came out. I found that Robins were leaving at the rate of about 100 every minute on my side alone, and an actual count of one thousand was made. At 5.05 o'clock the Grackles began to be disturbed. At 5.18 o'clock the first flock of Cowbirds rose, about fifteen in number. By this time the Robins had nearly all departed, and for the next ten minutes only Cowbirds flew out, which they did at the rate of fifty every minute on my side of the trees.

At 5.28 o'clock the first flock of Grackles, about twenty-five in number, whirled about over the trees and settled again in the roost. This was considered unusual, as they generally left at once. I think the bad weather conditions were responsible for this departure from the usual custom. The next minute, however, the whole flock of remaining birds, chiefly Grackles and Cowbirds rose in a body, and after circling around doubtfully for some minutes, flew away toward the east. The Cowbirds left the flock soon after it rose and flew toward the west. The Robins seemed to go equally in all directions. At 5.30 o'clock there were no birds left in the trees.

In summing up the situation several things seemed to be established. The Grackles came in early and settled, and were followed immediately by the Cowbirds, which had apparently been waiting for that very thing. The last to come were the Robins. In the departure in the morning the reverse was the order, the Robins scattering first, followed by the Cowbirds, and lastly the Grackles, which rose in a body from the east side of the trees where they had collected. There was very little noise during the arrival or departure, and one going by at night would not be aware of the presence of the birds, though the grove is not over twenty-five feet from the road.

It is evident that weather conditions influence the number of birds present, especially the Grackles. On Monday morning the number of birds was about the same except the Grackles, which did not count more than 500. This is significant, as on the evening before the rain fell in torrents about roosting-time.

The direction of arrival and departure of the birds was well defined. The Grackles from the east, the Cowbirds from the west, and the Robins equally in all directions.

The number of birds which regularly roosted here was estimated to be about 7500, of which 3000 were Grackles, 2500 Robins, and 2000 Cowbirds.

No Redwings were seen or heard, but a dead one was picked up a few days before my visit.

So far as I could learn this record for twenty-four hours was about the same throughout the season.