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A NEW PECKING ORDER

Dive-bombing grackles send workers running

The blackbirds' efforts to defend their nest ruffle some feathers downtown

By **BILL MURPHY**
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Some people who work in the seat of Harris County government are having trouble with higher-ups, and it has nothing to do with bosses or elected officials.

Aggressive grackles around the County Administration Building launched attacks Monday that left a lawyer bloodied and county employees wondering whether Hitchcock's *The Birds* was make-believe.

The blackbirds flew their sorties on Preston in the morning. They swooped out of a stand of magnolia trees in front of the building and locked in on pedestrians' heads, hair and backs.

Grackles dived at a lawyer on his way to the county civil courthouse, said Precinct 1 Deputy Constable Wilbert Jue.

The lawyer swatted a bird away and was readying for another attack when he tripped and injured his face, Jue said. Paramedics treated him for several cuts.

The great-tailed grackles have been attacking passers-by the past three or four years in the late spring, said Jue, who provides security in the lobby of the county administration building.

They appear to be protecting their offspring, he said. A young grackle had fallen out of its nest Monday, and adult birds attacked people who got too close, Jue said.

"They were just going crazy," he said. "They were attacking everybody that walked by."

The county closed off the sidewalk with police tape.

"This is a very Hitchcock kind of story. Very Tippi Hedren," said Laura Aranda Smith of the county tax assessor-collector's office, referring to one of the stars of *The Birds*.

Sylvia Velasquez, a deputy county clerk, said one of the birds attacked her hair.

"I hit him with a bottle. The other birds came, and one attacked my blouse and on my back," she said.

She slid to the ground. Two women came to help her, and the birds turned on them, she said. The trio ran to the safety of the building.

Grackles, along with many other types of birds, will go to great lengths to defend a young bird, especially one on the verge of flying, said Winnie Burkett, Houston Audubon Society sanctuary manager.

They nest in colonies, so a number of adults, not merely the parents of the fallen bird, may have been behind the attacks, said Gary Clark, a dean at North Harris College who writes a nature column for the Chronicle.

Male great-tailed grackles are black with an iridescent sheen and have long tails. They were native to Mexico and South Texas, but have spread to Houston, Burkett said.

RESOURCES

GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE

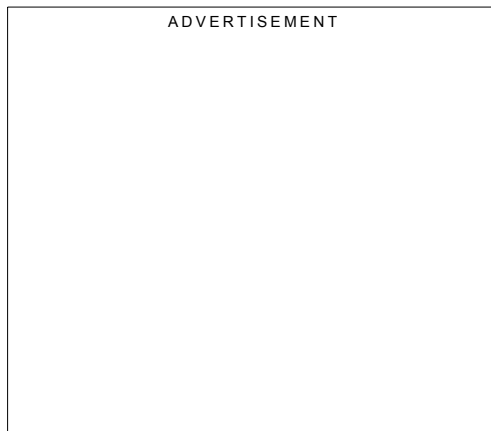
The blackbirds are common year-round in Houston, often flocking to trees in heavily populated areas.

- **Color:** Males iridescent black; females brown
- **Size:** Length 15-18 inches; wingspan 15-25 inches
- **Scientific name:** *Quiscalus mexicanus*

June Carlile, a deputy county clerk who was attacked Monday, joked that, if the birds want war, they'll get it.

"We're going to use our umbrellas and mace the next time," she said, laughing.

bill.murphy@chron.com



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