

# UNUSUAL NEST SITE FOR GRACKLES

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While checking island nesting colonies of Great Blue Herons, Black-crowned Night Herons and Double-crested Cormorants on some of Manitoba's major lakes in June 1979, I noticed several Common Grackles in the vicinity of tree-nesting cormorants and herons.

On 11 June I saw a grackle fly from the tree-nest of a Great Blue Heron on an island south of Hunter's Point, Lake Winnipegosis (53°00'N, 100°58'W). As I checked more islands I became more curious as to why the grackle was in a heron nest. On 19 June 1979, while checking St. Martin Island colonies on Lake Winnipeg, (52°17'N, 98°01'W), I noticed another grackle suddenly flying from a tree-nest. I eventually found grackles' nests built beneath and within the bottom structures of at least two cormorants' and as many as three Great Blue Herons' nests. The heron nests were 75 to 100 cm in diameter and often 15 to 30 cm or more thick. Double-crested Cormorants' nests were much less substantial, seldom more than 60 cm in diameter and often nearly thin enough to see through. The island had virtually no normal nesting sites for grackles, as trees had been killed by extensive bird use and ground vegetation was trampled by White Pelicans, gulls and terns. All nests used by grackles were between 150 and 300 cm above the ground in dead or nearly dead willows. They were anchored to the nesting material of cormorants and herons with grass. The grackle nests hung on the sides or just below the larger birds' nests.

On 26 June 1979 a colony of cormorants and Great Blue Herons was visited on Kawinaw Lake (52°50'N, 99°29'W). The island is over 10 ha in size and contains substantial areas of marsh vegetation and live willows, suitable for more traditional grackle nesting sites. Here, too, at least three active grackle nests were found anchored in the bottom material of heron nests. One of these nests, checked by Pat Rakowski (Canadian Wildlife Service Biologist), contained three live young herons on top and five dead young grackles below. This observation may indicate that the two species may not live in harmony or the nest could have been deserted for a number of other reasons. On 28 May 1980 the Kawinaw Lake island was visited by R. W. Nero and myself. We saw three pairs of grackles occupying nests located at the base of heron nests. Not all heron nests were checked for grackles and not all grackle nests observed were occupied, as some were clearly from previous years.

Common Grackles have been known to use a variety of nest habitats. Grackles have nested in bird houses, buildings and the bottom structures of Osprey nests.<sup>1</sup> In Texas, Great-tailed Grackles also use heron nests.<sup>2</sup> House Sparrows have been reported to build their nests on the underside of Red-tailed Hawk nests some distance from farm buildings.<sup>3</sup> There is an indication that House Sparrows derive some benefit from the arrangement. Success of grackle nests built beneath Great

Blue Heron or Double-crested Cormorant nests is unknown. Presumably, the use of such sites is related to the availability of alternative suitable nesting habitat. However, the occurrence of House Sparrows beneath nests far from buildings and the use by grackles of heron nests in the presence of apparently suitable habitat suggests that there may be a closer relationship. Grackles would certainly receive protection from avian predators, rain and sun exposure as well as being pro-

vided with a suitable anchor to support their nests in an inconspicuous location.

<sup>1</sup>BENT, A. C. 1958 reprint. Life histories of North American blackbirds, orioles, tanagers and their allies. Dover Publ. Inc., New York.

<sup>2</sup>HARRISON, C. 1978. A field guide to the nests, eggs and nestlings of North American birds. Collins, London.

<sup>3</sup>PETERSON, L. 1979. Wisc. Nat. Res. Tech. Bull. III, Madison, Wisc.



*Great Blue Herons nesting*

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