

Memorandum

The Grackle War



The grackle control crew and supervisors

by Jerry D. Harrison
Superintendent of Grounds
Maintenance
University of Texas/Austin

The University of Texas at Austin has been plagued by a large infestation of grackles since 1979. Even before that time, we had grackles on the campus, but the numbers were not significant enough

to warrant trying to move them. Their numbers began a steady increase over a three-to-four year period from the mid-1970s. By the end of the decade, we had a real problem. The numbers continued to increase. Then, after a very cold week in late December 1989, it appeared that the birds would take over.

We began increasing our efforts to clean up after them, which at this point required approximately 50 labor hours per week (\$350). During an average year this could extend from mid-November through March. The problem was that the grackles could make more mess than we could clean up. Everyone, from students to top administration, was tired of the mess—we had to come up with something to move the grackles off the campus.

Our past attempts to move the grackles from campus had included rubber snakes, scare eye balloons, clapper boards, tacky food bird repellent, tree pruning to reduce the crown and amount of cover, crown

gun, high-pressure water spray, avalarms, and a pyrotechnic device. As we analyzed our past failures, and the failures and few successes of others around the country, we realized that whatever we were going to do, we had to do it on a campus-wide scale. Also, in analyzing the other methods we determined that whatever tactic we used, it needed to be loud and as near to the birds as possible. Our most successful approach had been with the crow gun. The problem was we only had one gun; therefore, we could only work a limited area, and many times the birds would move in behind us.

After considerable contemplation, we arrived at what was to be our proposed plan of attack. This would be to strategically locate 15 workers (wearing fluorescent vests for easy identification) on the main campus (approximately 400 acres). Each person would be armed with a 12-gauge shotgun, cracker shells (pyrotechnic devices that are fired from a gun, and the main explosion occurs near the birds), and a two-way radio for communication purposes. The firing would begin as the birds began to roost and would continue until it became too dark for the birds to fly away (they do not like to fly after dark). The plan was to do this every evening for 10 consecutive days, then evaluate our success or failure and adjust our plan accordingly.

A critical part of our plan included alerting the campus community of our proposal to ensure its support, since our work was going to be somewhat loud and disruptive. We planned to alert the students and staff through the campus newspaper, the campus radio station, and memos to all department heads. Additionally, the local news media was notified in hopes that they would provide information to the residents of Austin. The university police were involved to provide support, such as training sessions on gun safety and availability in the event that any problems arose during the actual firings.

The estimated cost for this grackle control project was \$2,500 for materials and approximately \$2,500 for labor, since it would involve overtime. This estimate was for initially moving the roost; the labor cost would increase when the birds return and need to be reminded that they are not welcome.

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We presented the plan to the administration for approval, which we received. Then we began to work out the details, such as what night we would start firing, contacting the university police about conducting a class on gun safety, and ordering all materials including 15 (12-gauge) shotguns, cracker shells, fluorescent vests, and safety goggles. Once all these things were in place we were ready for the assault.

Finally, on February 13, we began the actual campaign. We assembled all participants at 5:00 p.m. to review gun safety, outline our plan of attack, and issue the shotguns, vests, shells, and safety goggles. We wanted everyone to be absolutely sure that they understood what we were trying to do so there would not be any problems. We divided the campus into 15 areas with one person in each area, armed with a 12-gauge shotgun and 10 cracker shells. The plan was to fire above the trees as the grackles began to search for roosts. At approximately 6:30 p.m., we began firing and continued until approximately 7:10 p.m. During this time we fired 185 shells. The birds were obviously disturbed and many left the campus, but we did not know if they would return as soon as they realized we were gone.

The second day, we continued along the same lines, firing 151 shells. We noticed that the grackles were very nervous and the numbers were reduced from the previous night.

On the third day, we fired 88 shells, mostly in the perimeter areas of campus, with very few birds landing in the interior areas.

On the following day, we varied our plan slightly, firing at the flocks as they were flying. Doing this we fired 138 shells, and few birds attempted to land. We also fired 37 shells in the area around the Governor's Mansion (which is located eight blocks south of the campus) at their request.

On day five, we only fired 20 shells on campus and seven at the Governor's Mansion. There were very few birds on campus, and most were flying very high, with no apparent intention of landing.

The sixth day, we only fired four shells and saw very few birds on or near the campus. We did some checking and found large numbers of birds along Town Lake, approximately a mile and a quarter from campus.

On the seventh day, we reduced our patrol to five people and only two shots were fired. This was our seventh consecutive night to fire, and it appeared that we were successful. At that point we sus-

ended our regular nightly patrols.

We continued to check the campus for returning birds, but very few were seen until the following Thursday. This sighting was limited to about 25 birds in one or two trees in one area. That Friday night we had one person go after this group of birds. They were not easily moved, but finally gave in after 13 shots were fired.

Two weeks later, a group of less than 50 birds apparently returned. We sent out a crew of four workers to this area of campus to try to convince this group of determined birds that they were not welcome. The crew also checked the remainder of the campus and did not find enough birds to warrant shooting. Fourteen shots were fired during this mini campaign. The problem was checked before sunrise on Friday and the birds had not returned during the night.

Since that time we have kept a constant patrol for grackles, and we have to fire periodically, as necessary, until later in the spring when the grackles no longer return. When the fall returned the birds came with it, seeking their winter roost. We once again greeted them with cracker shells, causing them to establish their roost somewhere else.

Our actual cost ended up being somewhat higher than we had anticipated. This

was due to more overtime each night in order to ensure safe handling of the guns and shells (which included cleaning the guns each evening), additional time waiting for the birds to come in, and to attempt to ensure that they were settled somewhere else for the night before we quit for the evening. We also purchased a larger quantity of shells due to a significant price break. Even with the added expenditures, we are still spending less now than when we were attempting to clean up after the birds.

In conclusion, we feel that our efforts were very successful, even though there are still a few grackles (less than 100) left on campus. This plan is not as permanent as we had hoped, but accomplished at least a 95 percent reduction in the number of birds. Less than 5 percent that remain are dispersed enough that they are not really a problem. We have learned that we can move them anytime they begin to increase and create a problem. The shotguns and cracker shells can successfully move the birds, but the factor that contributed to our success was alerting the campus community, through the news media, getting their support, and the support of the administration.

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Unfortunately, as is all too common in the current business mindset, short-term exploitation of resources for quick and maximum profit is the overriding concern.

Hurwitz looted the workers' pension funds as a way to cover his takeover costs and he paid himself a \$20 million bonus last summer. Meanwhile, the company town of Scotia is facing an uncertain future; once the trees are gone, so will be the jobs. Families, generations of which have worked for Pacific Lumber, will find their way of life destroyed.

The fact that Hurwitz specifically excluded the press from his lecture suggests that he is not comfortable with a free examination of his activities.

We were always under the impression that the University was "the marketplace of ideas" and a forum for the free exchange of information, but apparently, the College of Business Administration can't see the profit in that. Inviting Hurwitz to give a lecture on ethics implies that either they are ignorant of, or merely callous regarding, his business activities.

Who's giving the next lecture — Ivan Boesky or Jim Bakker?

Annie Kearns
Bureau of Economic Geology
Dennis Kearns
Department of Botany

'Killer' Union ad out of line

Granted, the advertising business is a competitive, dog-eat-dog enterprise. You're either selling and on top, or you're nowhere. However, in Tuesday's *The Daily Texan*, the unnecessarily violent advertisements espousing the glory of the Texas Union's facilities crossed the line.

We all know the longing for pastry and a cup of joe can get pretty fierce, but the wording in the Union's ad was starkly out of place and even upsetting.

What's next? "If I don't get a #2 burrito I'll cut my throat" or "I'd disembowel somebody for a five-section notebook!"

Come on, guys. Sell! Sell! Sell! But let's keep it clean.

Chesley Allen
English

Birds a real problem, man

Please, Patricia Kennedy ("Drop anti-grackle cannons," *Firing Line*, Monday) look at the grackles from another point of view!

I'm positive there has been more than "one complaint about grackle droppings on cars" — I'm sure there have been a multitude of complaints. And not just from lamenting auto owners, either.

As you obviously fail to remember, some of us aren't lucky enough to drive our poop-covered cars away from the Uni-

versity and the grackles each evening. Some of us actually live here. To us, grackles are more than just a problem of damaged cars. They're a real concern.

You compared the cannons to a scene out of *Steel Magnolias*. But try jogging around 6 p.m. and you'll think Alfred Hitchcock is filming in the quad! Don't leave the cafeteria with an ice-cream or you may get a surprise topping.

Not only are the grackles loud and annoying, they're a health hazard. A group of birds that size is a high-risk disease carrier and besides that, they're just plain disgusting.

It's not that we expect the pavement to be "free of bird droppings," but when you can't see the pavement underneath your feet, much less breath while walking over it (try after a heavy rain — Mmmm!), then there is a valid problem.

Patricia, we're not talking about a "few pesty grackles" — we're talking about thousands! An incomprehensible multitude of dirty, filthy, obnoxious grackles! And spring is coming — these birds have been copulating all winter. Imagine how their numbers will grow!

Though I'm not the biggest fan of the cannons, at least they demonstrate a willingness on the part of the administration to solve the problem before it gets worse. They aren't killing the birds, but trying to get them to leave. They could kill the damn things, but they don't.

I'll be the first to admit the cannons aren't terribly successful; however, I can't come up with a better idea, so I'll trust the University to do what it has to until the problem is solved.

If you still don't understand, Patricia, why don't you come over sometime, preferably after it rains, and we'll take a nice leisurely stroll down Speedway about 6:30 p.m. (no umbrellas or gas masks allowed!). Then we'll go back to my dorm and you can have a nice big glass of water from the tap that smells like bird crap.

If you still feel such a deep commitment to grackle rights after that, I think I speak for all the residents in University housing when I give you permission to take them all home with you. You can have them.

Liesl L. Gray
Littlefield dorm resident

On the menu this evening ...

After watching the UT-Arkansas farce on Sunday, I have come to the conclusion that Nolan Richardson is the biggest coward in the Southwest Conference. By leaving the court early, he has taught us one important lesson: When the chips are down, just quit. I just don't see how this spineless jellyfish can live with himself.

Rob Imperato
Communications

Daily Texan Firing Line 2/9/90



ANGERINE

DAILY TEXAN 2/16/90

Salena Fisher

ONCE UPON A MIDNIGHT DREARY, AS I
STUDIED, WEAK AND WEARY,
WHILE I NODDED, NEARLY NAPPING,
SUDDENLY THERE CAME A TAPPING
AS OF SOME ONE RAPPING UPON MY
DORM WINDOW PANE.
"TIS A BRANCH IN THE WIND" I THOUGHT,
"OR A DROP OF RAIN."



TO THE WINDOW I NOW TURNED TO SEE,
WITH MANY A START AND A STUTTER,
THERE SAT A GRISLY GRACKLE, WITH
BEADY EYES THAT MADE ME SHUDDER.
"THING OF EVIL!" SAID I. "DID YOU NOT
HEAR THE GUNS YOU SO ABHOR?
"GET THEE BACK INTO THE TEMPEST
AND THE NIGHT'S PLUTONIAN SHORE!"



BUT THE TREE WAS TEEMING WITH BIRDS
THAT GAWKED AS I WAS SCREAMING.
THEIR EYES HAD ALL THE SEEMING OF A
DEMON THAT IS DREAMING,
AND THE LAMP LIGHT O'ER THEM STREAMING
THROWS THEIR SHADOWS ON THE FLOOR,
AND THE GRACKLE, NEVER FLITTING, STILL IS
SITTING, STILL IS SITTING,
QUOTH THE GRACKLE,
"EVERMORE!"



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2/7/90

Bird Bowl: UT fires back, students cry fowl

Shane Utter
Special to the Texan

The Physical Plant master plan — aside from the crow gun — includes using 15 single-shot 12-gauge shotguns with "cracker shells" that explode like fireworks above the trees. And after only one week, it appears that the University may win this time.

Jerry Harrison, superintendent of grounds maintenance for the Division of Physical Plant, said the anti-grackle campaign uses a "crow gun" — a non-projectile sound weapon powered by liquid propane gas. The gun can fire at 45-second intervals and creates a loud explosion that scares the birds out of the trees.

"We've been using the cannon for the heavily populated areas up and down Speedway, on West Mall and around Kinsolving," Harrison said. "Next week we'll be trying to run the birds off campus from the center out."

The intended goal, Harrison added, is to fan the grackle population away from the UT campus in all directions.

The physical plant master plan — aside from the crow gun — includes using 15 single-shot 12-gauge shotguns with "cracker shells" that explode like fireworks above the trees. "This is going to be a well-coordinated effort starting in the middle of campus," Harrison said. "We'll be using two-way radio and we'll be well marked so that people will know that we're the good guys. I don't want people thinking that we're snipers or anything."

Harrison said the methods are safe and do nothing more than scare the birds. A similar campaign recently was used along the Riverwalk in San Antonio with good results; the Division of Physical Plant keeps in contact with city officials there for suggestions on grackle



John McCormico/Daily Texan Staff

UT physical plant employee John Yount waits for his 'crow gun,' used to frighten away grackles, to go off.

control.

"We just want people to be aware of what's going on," he said. "We're just trying to get the birds to roost somewhere else."

John Yount, crew leader of grounds maintenance for the physical plant, said student reaction to the crow gun has not been very positive.

"People are always cussing at me — calling me names," he said. "I tell them to cover their ears, that there's going to be a loud explosion. Some people listen, some don't."

But he said the shotguns will be quieter and less disturbing than the crow gun. "They're more like a Roman candle."

The physical plant gave up its battle against the birds in August after years of efforts that included plac-

ing alarms in the trees that emitted "distressed grackle calls." At the time, officials said they would just try to clean up after the birds.

However, Physical Plant officials decided to resume the war when hosing down the sidewalks three times a week didn't help, Harrison said. "Complaints were being registered almost daily and reports of injuries began to appear," he said. "The droppings were so thick in places that people would slip and fall," he said.

Harrison added that the physical plant got off to a late start in the grackle war. The birds begin building roosts in early fall and, once situated, are difficult to remove.

Eric Stoutner, who as associate director of the Division of Recreation at Sports works in the grackle-in-

fest Gregory Gym area, said he remains skeptical.

"I haven't noticed a thing," he said. "It hasn't helped a bit in terms of what's on the ground and underfoot when I walk out of here."

Yount said besides the occasional protests from belligerent students, this most recent anti-grackle offensive has gone without complaint — except one that Yount recalls from last week.

"The police got a call that the HRC [Harry Ransom Center] had blown up," he said. "The police came and said 'We thought it was you, but we had to check anyway.'"

With reports by John McCormico, Daily Texan Staff



The Tattler



Published Quarterly

Volume 3 Issue 9

The Physical Plant / Utilities Newsletter

Spring 1990

Grackle Problem Finally Resolved

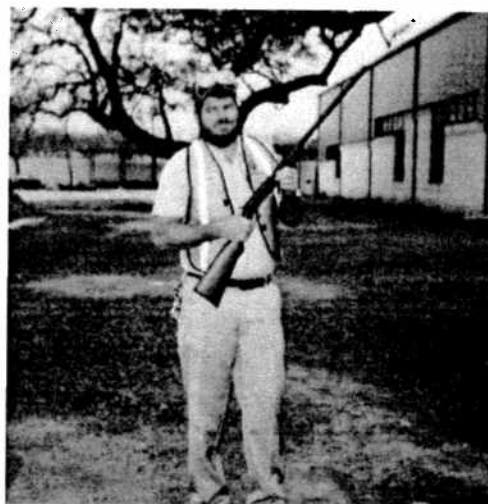
After trying a variety of less than successful methods to rid the University campus area of grackles, **Grounds Maintenance** may have finally succeeded. The grackles first appeared in the mid-70s and gradually increased in numbers until reaching a maximum about eight years ago. During this time, almost every known method of grackle eradication was tried: **Scare eyes** (which are like beach balls with big eyes painted on them and hung in the trees), **plastic blow up snakes** (also hung in the trees), **wooden 'Aggie clappers'** (two 1" X 4" boards hinged in the middle so you can slam them together and make a loud noise!), **avalarms** (electronic recordings of bird distress calls), **crow guns** (cannon like devices using propane), **trimming the trees** to disrupt roosting areas, and **spraying Tacky Foot** (a compound that is unpleasant for the birds to land on, but which only created a mess that had to be cleaned up). At one point, a bird expert was hired and he recommended using a **hand-held rocket** that chased the birds, but there was only one of these devices and it didn't work.

Nothing seemed to work, so Grounds Maintenance employees ended up hosing down the affected areas with fire hoses two or three times a week as early as 5:00 A.M. After complaints of the stench, reports of an accident, and damage to shrubs and trees, Grounds Maintenance investigated another method that worked in the San Antonio Riverwalk area. At dusk, for seven consecutive days, fifteen Grounds Maintenance employees shot over 600 cracker shells above the trees where the birds roost. Each was equipped with a single shot 12 gauge shotgun and outfitted in orange vest (so as not to frighten bystanders). The cracker shells sounded like firecrackers and were less offensive than crow guns. The grounds crews began firing as the birds began to roost and

continued until it became too dark for them to fly away (they don't like to fly after dark). The campus was divided into 15 areas with one person in each area armed with a 12 gauge shotgun and 10 cracker shells. Each night the grackle population dwindled. By the 7th day only a few shots were fired. Currently the plans are to fire again as necessary.

Grounds Maintenance purchased 15 shotguns and 4800 rounds of ammunition (more shotguns than the UT Police Dept.!). Before the shotguns were issued to the grounds crew, the U. T. Police provided a training session on gun safety. They were also available in the event any problems arose during the firings. You might say that UT's Grounds Maintenance section is the best armed in the state! The

(Story continued on page 9 See Grackles)



Larry Toungeate, Construction Machine Operator, is pictured here equipped for the shoot.

Grounds Maintenance



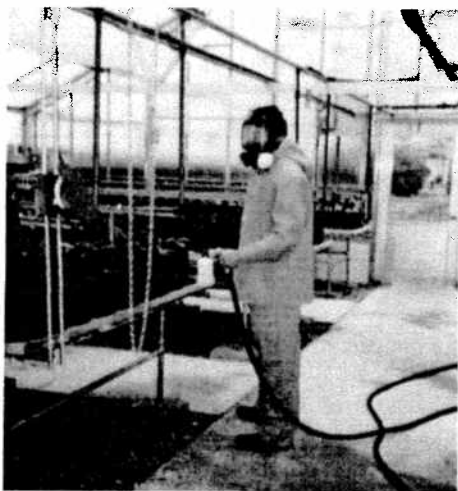
Spring appears to have started early this year despite the harsh weather we received late in December. This gives us more time to clean up the damage caused by the record breaking temperatures. The Grounds crews have been busy pruning back damaged plants and removing freeze killed plant material. Leonard Sauls, Assistant Landscape Supervisor said, "We may have lost over 2,000 shrubs this winter. Trees were also damaged including some of our prized mountain laurels." The combination of a hot dry summer and a frigid cold winter can take its toll on all but the hardiest of plants.

Pictured right are Fernando Fernandez, Gardener, Andrew Bradford, Crew Leader, and Maurice Chavez, Groundskeeper



They are removing dead shrubs from an area outside Robert Lee Moore Hall and Ernest Cockrell Jr. Hall.

It's been interesting "ironing out the bugs," so to speak in our new greenhouses. As with any new equipment, adjustments have to be made. Grounds is fortunate to have many employees who are "Jacks of all trades," to help with the greenhouses. To operate them requires not only knowledge of plants but also the ability to handle the mechanics of greenhouse equipment. We are now propagating most of our



Pictured left is John Welsch, Gardener, spraying insecticide in the greenhouse.

summer/fall annuals for the campus area beds, from cuttings as well as seed germination. The greenhouses also contain over 200 tropicals for use in campus setups. We propagate a few interior tropicals and plan to expand on this quite a bit.

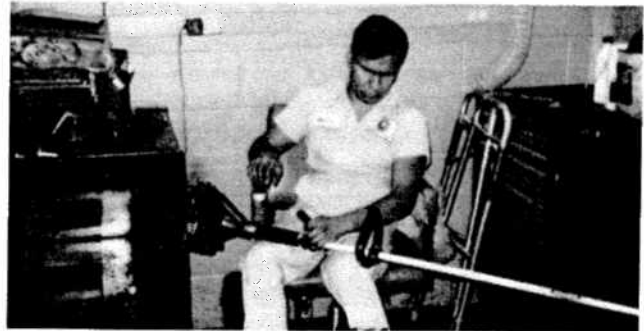
We want to welcome three new part-time employees who will be working with us in the afternoons this spring: Chris Taylor, Joe Carlson, and Phillip Chavez. They are from area high schools and are sponsored by the Austin Urban League. They will work on various crews where the extra help is needed. This will also expose them to a variety of jobs in the Grounds Department.

Grackles (continued from page 1)

shots were used to scare the birds from the center of campus to the outer edges. This time the operation was a success because the entire campus was covered. But where did the birds go? One large flock headed south straight for the governor's mansion, less than one mile away. They converged on the lawn in one big, mad, squawking flock, as if demanding an audience with Gov. Bill Clements himself. He wasn't home. George Richter went to the governor's mansion and forced the birds further south. Grackles were also spotted in Waterloo Park and in the park area along Town Lake. Apparently this method worked but it is not a one-time affair. It will be an ongoing process. Howard Wilson, Physical Plant Director, said, "We're waiting to see whether they come back but for the time being, it's now a much nicer place."



Left: Isaac Harper, Grounds Maintenance Leader & Stephen Schoen, Groundskeeper repairing sprinkler heads at Little Campus



Above: Santos Rodriguez, Maintenance Worker II, Repairing a weed eater

On campus

A PUBLICATION FOR FACULTY AND STAFF AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

VOL. 17, NO. 24
MARCH 26-APRIL 1, 1990

Is it really victory at last in grackle war?

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN IS DECLARING victory in the War of the Grackles. Finally.

UT personnel had been trying for years to get rid of thousands of black-winged grackles that roosted in the trees on campus, soiling the sidewalks with their droppings and filling the air with their raucous bird chatter.

Grackle control plans had been as intense as they were futile. Early attempts to rid the campus of the birds included placing rubber snakes and balloons in trees, using clapper boards, high-pressure water spray, netting and even a recording which supposedly sounded like a dying grackle. But the cackling grackles, whose droppings present a health hazard as well as a mess, refused to leave. Grackles, which are migratory birds, are protected by federal law, so University officials had to try to drive them out rather than kill them.

Last month UT employees decided enough was enough. Fifteen men armed with 12-gauge shotguns loaded with cracker shells (exploding firecracker-type devices) began firing above the trees as the birds started to roost. The combination of noise, flash, location and persistence apparently did the trick.

"All the men were strategically located on the 400-acre main campus and ready for the assault," said Howard Wilson, director of the physical plant. "We finally chased them from the campus."

From the campus, yes, but it was discovered that the birds had flown straight to the Governor's Mansion, about 10 blocks south of the campus. In a good-will gesture, the University sent its grackle-dispersion team to drive the flock away and now the birds are thought to be roosting around Town Lake.

They haven't been back to the campus in almost a month.

The shotgun attacks, which began at dusk when grackles started to settle down and roost, went on for several nights. The campaign began Feb. 13 and by Feb. 19 the University suspended its regular nightly grackle patrol. Wilson said one problem spot remains on the campus — an area near the Engineering Science Building where a small group of grackles refuses to leave.

"For the most part, we've sent the grackles back to

Please turn to UNIVERSITY DECLARES, Page 8

Beginning with the next issue of On campus, the Weekly Calendar of Events will become the Calendar of Events and will cover a two-week period. That issue will be dated April 2-8 and the Calendar of Events will include April 2-15 listings. The deadline for submission of items is 9 a.m. March 27.



Photograph by Larry Murphy

The dirty birds: How long will they be gone?

John

UT News

THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN

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Contact: Nancy Neff
Date: March 16, 1990
(Photos Available)

UT wins grapple with grackles

AUSTIN, Texas -- The University of Texas at Austin is declaring victory in the War of the Grackles. Finally, UT personnel had been trying for years to get rid of thousands of black-winged grackles that roosted in the trees on campus, soiling the sidewalks with their droppings and filling the air with their raucous bird chatter.

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"For the most part, we've sent the grackles back to Austin from where they came," Wilson said. "These birds came to us because of development in the greater Austin area and because the grackles like live oak trees, which keep leaves year around," he said. The UT Austin campus has about 4,000 trees, many of them live oaks.

UT had been plagued by grackles since 1979. "Their numbers began to steadily increase and before long it appeared that the birds would take over," said Jerry Harrison, grounds maintenance superintendent. At one point, physical plant employees were spending 50 hours a week cleaning up after the birds.

(over)

-UT--Grackle war over

The estimated cost for the most recent grackle control project was \$9,000 for materials and overtime pay. "This estimate is for initially moving the roost -- the labor cost may increase if the birds return and need to be reminded that they are not welcome," said Harrison. Past expenses include \$22,000 for tree trimming and nearly \$500 for rubber snakes, balloons and a crow gun. "Even with the recent added expenditures, we are still spending less now than when we were attempting to clean up after them," he said.

"The problem was that the grackles could make more mess than we could clean up," said Harrison. "We had to come up with something to move the grackles off the campus."

The following are some of the methods the grounds maintenance section of the physical plant attempted:

■ Tree trimming: Severe pruning of trees to remove the smaller branches which the birds roost on. Result: The birds still used the trees, but since there were fewer branches, they also used other trees in the area.

■ Pyrotechnics gun: A starter pistol which had an attachment that shot a whistle chaser into the air. Result: The birds moved from one place to another, but returned.

■ Avalarm: A recording which sounded like a grackle in distress. The recording, played over a loud speaker, was a very loud and irritating noise. Result: No effect on the birds at all.

■ Wooden clappers: Two pieces of wood attached with a hinge. The boards were slapped together producing a loud noise. Result: The birds moved from one location to another at first, but they became accustomed to the noise and many just stayed where they were.

■ Rubber snakes: These were blow up snakes about five feet long which were placed in the top of trees. Result: The birds did not move at all.

■ Netting placed over trees. Result: Successful for limited use.

■ Crow gun. This is not actually a gun, but it does make a very loud noise that sounds much like a shotgun. Result: The birds moved from one location to another, but returned. This method also scared quite a few people.

Although lumped together as grackles, the campus bird problem actually included great-tailed grackles, common grackles, starlings, cow birds and red-winged blackbirds. Ninety-five percent, however, appeared to be common grackles that would come to the UT campus at dusk and leave at dawn, sometimes flying 20 or 30 miles to feed in fields outside Austin.

In analyzing past failures and the few successes around the country, UT employees realized whatever they were going to do, it had to be campus-wide, as near to the birds as possible and most importantly -- loud.

"Grackles are a type of bird that send in scouts first," said Wilson. "If it looks like they're coming back, we'll be ready."

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Staff photo by Smiley N. Pool

UT workers like Leonard Moreno are shouldering new weapons in the war on grackles — shotguns firing harmless but loud 'cracker shells,' which sound much like exploding Roman candles — to scare the messy birds away from the campus.

GUNS AGAINST GRACKLES

2/8/90

UT uses noisy but harmless weapons in bird battle

By Scott W. Wright
American-Statesman Staff

The plastic owls didn't daunt them. The rubber snakes couldn't startle them. And the scary-eyed balloons sent floating by their roosts failed to ruffle their feathers.

So now, University of Texas officials have brought out the heavy artillery in their 5-year-old battle against an army of bothersome birds that has invaded the 435-acre campus.

Ground maintenance crews — determined to rid the university once and for all of the hordes of grackles that reside there — last week began firing a cannonlike device at dusk each night to scare off the birds.

The kaboom has begun to clear them out.

Thrilled that they may have finally found an effective weapon in the Great Grackle War, officials said Wednesday they are anticipating the arrival of yet another new tactical tool to add to their anti-avian arsenal.

Starting Monday, workers armed with 12-gauge shotguns will launch a

second offensive and begin firing off rounds of "cracker shells," which sound similar to exploding Roman candles.

"We had almost run out of ideas," said Jerry Harrison, superintendent of grounds maintenance for the university's physical plant. "We've just about tried it all. Nothing seemed to work. It just moved the birds from one tree to another."

The university has spent at least \$30,000 in the past five years trying to discourage the grackles from roosting in campus trees, said Jerry DeCamp, assistant vice president for business affairs.

Some of that money was used to buy plastic owls, rubber snakes, wooden clappers and loudspeakers with distress calls — all of which have proved useless, DeCamp said.

Additional money was spent on pruning trees so that the birds would find their traditional nesting spots less comfortable, DeCamp said.

But the bulk of it has been used to buy fire hoses for a thrice-weekly cleaning of campus sidewalks so that passers-by won't slip on slick bird

droppings and take a tumble, he added. And on chemicals to curb the smell.

The grackles, which number more than 100,000, have damaged trees and shrubs, ruined the finish on cars and destroyed outdoor furniture on campus with their droppings.

Harrison said the university appears to be getting more bang for its bucks with the latest strategy, which also has been used to clear San Antonio's grackle-plagued Riverwalk.

He said university workers — outfitted in fluorescent orange vests and carrying hand-held radios — will begin their search-and-scatter missions at dusk each night next week.

Starting at the center of campus and pushing their way outward, they will fire off rounds of cracker shells to scare off the birds in hopes the grackles will flee the noise-filled campus and never return.

"They'll be wearing the vests so that people won't be alarmed that men are carrying these guns around campus," Harrison said. "We don't want anybody to think we are snipers."

University declares victory in the War of the Grackles on campus

(Continued from Page 1)

Austin from where they came," Wilson said. "These birds came to us because of development in the greater Austin area and because the grackles like live oak trees, which keep leaves year around," he said. The UT Austin campus has about 4,000 trees, many of them live oaks.

UT had been plagued by grackles since 1979. "Their numbers began to steadily increase and before long it appeared that the birds would take over," said Jerry Harrison, grounds maintenance superintendent. At one point, physical plant employees were spending 50 hours a week cleaning up after the birds.

The estimated cost for the most recent grackle control project was \$9,000 for materials and overtime pay. "This estimate is for initially moving the roost — the labor cost may increase if the birds return and need to be reminded that they are not welcome," said Harrison. Past expenses include \$22,000 for tree trimming and nearly \$500 for rubber snakes, balloons and a crow gun. "Even with the recent added expenditures, we are still spending less now than when we were attempting to clean up after them," he said.

"The problem was that the grackles could make more mess than we could clean up," said Harrison. "We had

to come up with something to move the grackles off the campus."

The following are some of the methods the grounds maintenance section of the physical plant attempted:

- Tree trimming: Severe pruning of trees to remove the smaller branches which the birds roost on. Result: The birds still used the trees, but since there were fewer branches, they also used other trees in the area.
- Pyrotechnics gun: A starter pistol which had an attachment that shot a whistle chaser into the air. Result: The birds moved from one place to another, but returned.

- Avalarm: A recording which sounded like a grackle in distress. The recording, played over a loud speaker, was a very loud and irritating noise. Result: No effect on the birds at all.

- Wooden clappers: Two pieces of wood attached with a hinge. The boards were slapped together producing a loud noise. Result: The birds moved from one location to another at first, but they became accustomed to the noise and many just stayed where they were.

- Rubber snakes: These were blow up snakes about five feet long which were placed in the top of trees. Result: The birds did not move at all.

- Netting placed over trees. Result: Successful for limited use.

- Crow gun. This is not actually a gun, but it does make a very loud noise that sounds much like a shotgun. Result: The birds moved from one location to another, but returned. This method also scared quite a few people.

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—NANCY NEFF



Jerry Harrison, grounds maintenance superintendent at the University, decided that enough was enough after years of cleaning up after thousands of unwelcome grackles on campus. He and 14 other employees armed with 12-gauge shotguns and cracker shells (exploding firecracker-type devices) have finally chased the messy birds from the area.

Pesky birds in for shock of a lifetime from hotel

By **ZEKE MacCORMACK**
Light correspondent

Pigeons looking to light along a section of the River Walk will be *shocked* to discover that a hotel there has undertaken measures to prevent them from checking in.

The newest avian aversion system downtown employs more than five miles of electrical wire strung along ledges of the Hyatt Regency San Antonio and the Presa Street Bridge to shock unwanted birds from their perches.

"We're using low-voltage electricity for behavior modification for pigeons," said Richard Selzer, co-owner of the Flyaway Co. of Rockwall.

"We're approved by the Audubon Society," he said, adding that the shock is harmless to man and bird alike.

While the system deters pigeons, it is unlikely to bother great-tailed grackles that roost nightly in trees downtown, raising a ruckus and soiling sidewalks.

The Hyatt paid more than \$10,000 to fit 12 floors facing the river with the Flyaway system, a spokesman said. Selzer also fitted a portion of the Presa Street Bridge for the city free of charge as a demonstration.

But the city is not likely to electrify River Walk bridges and ledges because the cost - \$3,000 a bridge - is prohibitive, city Parks and Recreation Director Ronald R. Darner said.

He also said that while pigeons do flutter, ~~bob~~ and weave their way around downtown - leaving their calling cards along the way - they are "secondary and relatively easy to control" compared to the boisterous black and blue grackles that spend the winter here.

Seizer, who quit his job as a beer salesman four years ago to start Flyaway with his father, said his shocking system also has been employed against squirrels, rats, raccoons and beavers.

"We're still working on the grackle end," Selzer said.

*The newest
avian aversion
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wire*

SAN ANTONIO LIGHT
MONDAY
DECEMBER 4, 1989



At the heart of the anti-grackle sentiment downtown are the droppings that accumulate on trees, sidewalks and

buildings, threatening the health of residents, paint on cars and the tourist industry.

Annie Sipherd, manager of the tree-lined Big Bend Restaurant at 511 River Walk, said many potential customers "ran by the restaurant last year so they didn't get bird stuff on their heads."

And fireworks ignited for New Year's caused about 500 birds to fly into the restaurant, said Sipherd, noting, "It's much better for us this year."

The weapon of choice against grackles is a "clow gun," which resembles a starter pistol fitted with a high-flying explosive that is directed at incoming flocks.

The clow guns have been much more effective than the fake owls, fake snakes, balloons with scary faces, ultrasonic sound devices, bird distress calls and orchard sprayers that have been tried in the past, Darner said.

"We've looked into everything," including buying falcons, Darner said. "They're very expensive, \$5,000 for chicks, plus training. And it probably wouldn't look too good if they swooped down and killed a pigeon on the River Walk.

"The sure-fire way of ridding the problem is killing some of them. But that's very difficult because of the opposition I'm sure would be registered, and the other factor is how do you do it?"

Richard Hurd, river superintendent with the parks department, said the city pays \$35 in labor nightly to have two employees shoot "bird bombs" for three hours. He estimated \$1,900 will be spent this year on the clow guns and ammunition.

"I think we're being very successful this year," Hurd said.

He said last year the city employed seven or eight people to work three or four hours cleaning the sidewalks of bird droppings. "We have almost nothing this year, just normal cleaning," he said.

Mary Rosales, of the Mi Tierra Cafe and Bakery on Produce Row, suspects all the shooting at City Hall and the River Walk has scared the birds to Market Square and other locations.

"Maybe the problem is alleviated in some areas, but I think they're hanging around," she said.

Market Square Manager Robert Tagle said, "The bird problem is about 60 percent as bad as last year. But they still are a problem. They still mess up our trees and we have to wash every day and it smells terrible - like a wet long-haired dog - and that's putting it mildly."