www.dailytexanonline.com
Features Editor: Rachel Pearson
E-mail: features@dailytexanonline.com
Phone: (512) 471-8616

UT's war on grackles

University prepared if grackles want a rematch from '90s battle

By JJ Hermes
Daily Texan Staff

"In accordance with University policy, we write to request authorization to purchase 15, 12-gauge shotguns."

Such was the state of affairs in the early 1990s. Then-director of the Physical Plant Howard D. Wilson was requesting an arsenal of more shotguns than there were members of the entire UT Police Department.

Wilson wasn't countering a militia or starting up a skeet team — grackle control was on his mind. Boat-tailed grackles had finally overstayed their welcome at the University of Texas at Austin, and Physical Plant issued a call to arms.

The memo continued, "The proposed usage of the shotguns is to rid the campus of grackles." By firing "cracker shells" above trees inhabited by the birds, 15 University gunmen planned to use the firearms to disperse "a conical shell of spiraling whistles" to scare away the birds.

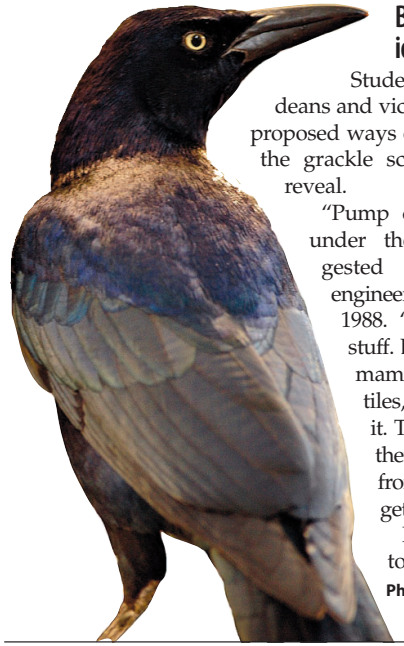
Since 1979, the aggressive and vocal black birds descend on campus with the start of each fall semester, running off more submissive birds and creating quite the poop problem until they migrate north in March.

For years the grounds crew went to battle with the grackles, always without success. The birds' numbers kept increasing until a particularly cold week in late December 1989 brought an overwhelming invasion of grackles.

"The stench was unbelievable, to put it mildly," said chemistry professor John Gilbert in a memo to Assistant Vice President for Business Affairs Jerry DeCamp on Jan. 9, 1990. "The sidewalks were 'knee deep' in leaves that were amply covered in excrement. One of my colleagues noted a characteristic wrinkling of the nose when he was escorting a prospective graduate student from ESB over to Welch Hall."

Bob L. Davis of the Texas Department of Health was consulted to see if the grackle droppings constituted a health risk. He said they did not, except in cases of "long-term contact with infected droppings." But the sheer fecal abundance was another story.

"The droppings were so thick in places that people would slip and fall," Superintendent of Grounds Jerry D. Harrison told The Daily Texan in February 1990.



Photos by Joe Buglewicz | Daily Texan Staff

Bird-brained ideas

Students, professors, deans and vice presidents all proposed ways of dealing with the grackle scourge, records reveal.

"Pump carbon dioxide under the trees," suggested one electrical engineering student in 1988. "Trees love the stuff. Birds, as well as mammals and reptiles, can't breathe it. The birds would therefore fly away from the trees to get more oxygen."

Faculty seemed to treat the situation more light-heartedly.

"Buy trained hawks," recommended marine science professor Carl Oppenheimer in a letter to then-President William H. Cunningham, complaining of a white spot on his black sweater from a morning encounter. "Genetically produce sterile birds — a job for the new Institute of Molecular Biology."

Then-Dean of Liberal Arts Robert D. King proposed a solution of his own in an Oct. 21, 1987 memo to G. Charles Franklin, then-vice president of business affairs.

"I have a solution to the grackle problem," King wrote. "A lot of people in Texas like to hunt. I like to shoot doves, ducks, geese, quail and other things that fly. I have never shot a grackle, but I think I could learn to like it. Why doesn't the University sell grackle permits for $25 a person? ... You could have a prize for the most grackles killed. The dean who shoots the highest number of grackles would be given a suitable prize, say, three unexcused absences from the University Council."

Two days later, Franklin shot back, "I simply don't know how to express the depth of my appreciation for the creative and ingenious solutions you have outlined. Yes, I am a wing-shooter! ... I promise you we will adopt your proposal without delay and capitalize on it. We will even enhance it! For example, we will award bonus points for shooting out windows. That way, we don't have to clean windows in the future (another cost-saving measure)."

Vice President for Student Affairs Ronald M. Brown, to whom the first two memos were carbon-copied, added his own flair.

"You are criminal brutes, advocating violation of the laws of the United States of America and the Austin City Council. I am alarmed, dismayed, embarrassed and mortified. Not to mention micturated."

Brown went on, "The City of Austin is a wildlife sanctuary by both Federal and Municipal decree. The shooting of all wildlife is forbidden in the city limits, which means that grackles are entitled to the same protection as freshman males and full professors of English."

Dean King's proposition was all the more ironic given that the University actually did end up buying 15 shotguns to deal with the feathered pests. But some of the professional opinions solicited by Physical Plant lacked a veil of satire, making them hilarious in their own right.

"One bird expert recommended using a hand-held rocket that chased the birds, but there was only one of these devices and it didn't work," reported the Tattler, a Physical Plant periodical, in the spring of 1990.

In actuality, and often at considerable cost, Physical Plant tried several methods: 5-foot-long blow-up snakes, wooden clappers, Av-Alarms (electronic recordings of distressed-sounding birds) and trimming the trees to thin places for the birds to roost. In the end, it seemed like all the grounds crew could do to help the situation was clean up after the birds, hosing down many walkways two or three times a week.

And the labor costs to prune trees and wash sidewalks were adding up. In a March 11, 1988 memo, John A. Burnsof the Physical Plant estimated the University would spend nearly $50,000 that year cleaning up after grackles.

A plan hatches

While grackles began to migrate onto campus again in December 1989, a plot was roosting in the Tower. President Cunningham received a letter from a graduate student highlighting successful steps taken along San Antonio's River Walk to curb grackle populations using "bird bombs" fired from .22-caliber pistols. Cunningham tipped off Franklin and DeCamp.

By early February 1990, a strike force had assembled. UTPD trained 15 Physical Plant workers in firearm safety. Locked and loaded with a stockpile of almost 5,000 12-gauge "cracker shells," the staff members drew up zones and tactics to fan out the birds.

The assault began on Feb. 13 when 185 shells peppered campus at dusk. On the fourth day, the offensive picked up. Workers fired 138 shells at the birds in flight, and eventually fired another 37 shells around the Governor's Mansion, where many grackles sought refuge.

On Feb. 19, only two shells were fired. One week and 600 shots later, staff members ceased and desisted from the grackle offensive: mission accomplished in the War on Grackles.

Administrative assistant Beverly Beaty-Benadom lauded the new effort in a memo to Physical Plant Director Wilson. Not only could she enjoy the mockingbirds and sparrows once scared away by the grackles, but she said that community members could "walk down the sidewalk at 24th and Speedway without holding our breath."

An April letter from chemistry professor Jack Gilbert to Wilson echoed comparable relief. "As I am sure you are aware, grackles are a persistent beast, and I trust that your staff will keep their trigger fingers 'itchy.'"

They would temporarily need those trigger fingers, as the last little flocks of grackles began to roost in the fall.

"Thought you might like to alert the Physical Plant Rambos," wrote Associate Vice President for Employee and Campus Services Joe A. Powell to Wilson that August.

Several shots were fired in mid-September around 24th Street and Speedway, but few grackles stuck around to put up a challenge; the insurgency was short-lived.

Wilson estimated in May 1990 that barely $8,000 had been spent on the "successful armed assault on the terrible grackle hoards." By June 1991, Harrison guessed that barely 5 percent of the original grackle population remained on campus.

Since, few grackles have dared stand up to the armed Physical Plant masses. Workers still trot out their shotguns from time to time, but grackles have not returned to campus with the vigor of the 1990s.

If they do return this winter, a gun-toting small army awaits them.