

**BAYOU CITY BIRDING  
ZINE #10  
BLACKBIRDS**

What's in this zine - Darth Vaders with feathers!?! Maybe, but each of these black birds also plays great roles in ancient legends, showing off talents that most other birds lack. Look for them as they strut across lawns, parks, and parking lots. Birds are shown in order of size, with the big scary ones first.

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**COMMON GRACKLE**

A GRACKLE'S FEATHERS SHIMMER WITH THE LIGHT OF THE SUN. MIGHT THERE BE MAGIC WITHIN?



**NOTE TO THE AMERICAN CROW**

PERCHING ON TOMBSTONES DOES VERY LITTLE TO IMPROVE YOUR SPOOKY REPUTATION...



AUGUST



APRIL

**EUROPEAN STARLING**



FEMALE

**GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE**



MALE



MALE



FEMALE

**RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD**



BY FLUFFING UP HER FEATHERS, THIS FEMALE GREAT-TAIL TAKES ON A NEW LOOK. COULD THE WOODS BE WHERE TALES OF SHAPESHIFTERS TOOK FORM?



**BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD**

MALE



FEMALE

## LEARN MORE...

The Blackbirds (including Grackles and Cowbirds), and similar black-colored birds (Crows and Starlings) can be found year-round feeding on grain, seeds, insects, trash, fruit, berries, and assorted small critters. They are easiest to spot in winter, when huge, noisy flocks gather every evening and perch in trees and on utility lines. See what you can discover about them by googling phrases such as “crow intelligence,” “crow raven legends myths,” “starling murmurations,” “starling invasive species,” “cowbird parasitism,” and “how does a cowbird learn to be a cowbird.”

**Download more of the Bayou City Birding Zines at [WhiteOakBayou.org](http://WhiteOakBayou.org)**

## AMERICAN CROW

**LOOK FOR:** A big, heavy black bird with a thick black bill. As with the other black birds, its feathers can look dull or glossy depending on the light.

**FIELD NOTES:** Crows are super smart and like to collect shiny things—so hang onto your keys and rings! They can count, use tools while feeding, and mimic human voices and other sounds. West Coast cousins of the American Crow can remember the faces of people who have scared them and then (somehow!) teach members of their flock to recognize and avoid these people. Crows call out CAW CAW CAW as they fly.

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1st SEEN ON AT

## GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE

**LOOK FOR:** A slender, shiny black bird with yellow eyes, a long curved bill, and an incredibly long tail that is re-grown each fall. Females are smaller, colored two-toned brown with a dark mask and light eyebrows.

**FIELD NOTES:** Although the population of most birds is decreasing as a result of habitat loss, the Great-tail is multiplying in both urban areas and farmland. They gather in the evening (often with Starlings), making an unbelievable amount of noise. A Mexican legend says they stole their seven songs from a sea turtle, singing of love, hate, fear, courage, joy, sadness, and anger.

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1st SEEN ON AT

## WHAT MAKES BLACKBIRDS SPECIAL?

Species like blackbirds who live together in big flocks are a lot smarter than those who live alone or in small family groups. Why? Well, life within groups requires constant communication as members make decisions about where to eat, where to gather at night, how to interact with each other, and how to avoid danger.

People of every time and place have recognized the intelligence of blackbirds. The legends of Native Americans describe the Raven (a cousin of the Crow) as being a trickster who created life and light, with other blackbirds believed to live at the edge of our world and the spirit world. Other cultures have described blackbirds as being shapeshifters, ghosts, and bearers of good and bad omens. Who do you think they are?

## COMMON GRACKLE

**LOOK FOR:** A bird about two-thirds the size of a Great-tail, with the same yellow eyes, but with a shorter bill, a much shorter tail, and a glossy bluish-purple head and neck. While the shiny highlights on the Great-tail’s body are bluish-purple, the highlights on the Common Grackle’s body (below the neck) are bronze or multi-colored. Females are duller than males.

**FIELD NOTES:** Nicknamed the Crackle, this bird—like the Great-tailed Grackle and Starling—makes an amazing (and often obnoxious) mix of high-pitched squeaks, screeches, squeals, rattles, and whistles.

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1st SEEN ON AT

## EUROPEAN STARLING

**LOOK FOR:** A black bird with pointed wings, short tail, and pink legs. The long, pointed bill is yellow in the spring and black in the fall. New feathers that grow in early fall are tipped with white—these tips wear off gradually to reveal glossy green and purple highlights.

**FIELD NOTES:** In 1890, sixty Starlings were brought from Europe and released in New York. Their offspring spread across the U.S., harming native species by competing for food and stealing the holes that birds like Woodpeckers make. Scientists study their almost magical ability to swirl in flocks called “murmurations.”

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## RED-WINGED BLACKBIRD

**LOOK FOR:** A black bird with a sharply pointed bill, whose bold red and yellow shoulder patches can be put on display or hidden. Females are streaked brown and white and have pale “eyebrows.”

**FIELD NOTES:** There are more Red-wings in the U.S. than any other native bird. A Native American legend describes how the Red-wing’s blood-red patches were created when a bird was wounded while trying to warn people of a fire set in a swamp by an angry man. Its call of “konk a REEEEE” sounds a little bit like a phrase meaning “the world and all within is burning.”

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## BROWN-HEADED COWBIRD

**LOOK FOR:** A small but heavy-set black bird with a brown head and a cone-like bill unlike those of the other blackbirds. Females are grayish-brown.

**FIELD NOTES:** Cowbirds once followed bison herds, feeding on the insects they stirred up and never staying in one place long enough to sit on a nest or raise chicks. Their not-so-nice solution was to lay eggs in the nests of other species, with some birds not knowing to toss these strange eggs out. Today, they continue to trick “foster-parents” into raising their kids, with the true chicks often going without the food they need.

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