

Quiscalus lugubris (Carib Grackle)

Family: Icteridae (New World Blackbirds)

Order: Passeriformes (Perching Birds)

Class: Aves (Birds)



Fig. 1. Carib grackle, *Quiscalus lugubris*.

[http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d0/Carib_Grackle_Male.jpg, downloaded 16 November 2014]

TRAITS. The Carib grackle is a small species of bird, the adult males reaching up to 27cm in length and the females up to 23cm (Wikipedia, 2014). Their weight range is between 74-142 g (Birdsoftt.com, 2014). It is sexually dimorphic in that the males have a fully black plumage with a violet shine as seen in Fig. 1, whilst the females have a browner and duller hue to theirs as well as shorter tails as seen in Fig. 2. They have a relatively long wedge shaped tail, and their feet and legs are also black. Its eye colour ranges from bright to dull yellow-white. Both sexes have short sharp, black bills (Oiseaux-birds.com, 2014). The juveniles are characterized by a brown plumage with brown eyes (Discover-tt.net, 2014).

ECOLOGY. The Carib grackle's habitat ranges from the open savannahs to edges of forests, and due to increased urbanization, has no trouble living in close proximity to towns, cities and near other human occupied areas thus displaying adaptability (Oiseaux-birds.com, 2014). They can be found on most parts of the lesser Antilles, Trinidad and Tobago and the northern parts of South America such as Colombia, Venezuela and Brazil (Neotropical.birds.cornell.edu, 2014). Its main call is characterized by consecutive 'chucks' (Beauty Of Birds, 2014) they are known to exhibit different calls when together with their mates. When flying, they have been observed to use strong wing beats in flight and their tails are put in a 'V' position when making glides. They also spend a lot of their time singing and fluttering their wings and tails. The Carib grackles in the different islands vary in appearance, but engage in much of the same activities such as singing. Within these songs, there are very distinct variations heard. This appears to be due to the difference in their region (Wikipedia, 2014). They are diurnal birds, i.e. they are active during the day and roost at night.

SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR. The bird is gregarious, i.e. they reside in flocks, some of which contain as much as 200-300 birds. They usually will roost in trees together and are very noisy. They are known to display aggressive behaviours towards approaching humans or other animals. They will attack the unwelcomed passerby using their feet or beak in groups by swooping down at them (Oiseaux-birds.com, 2014). In one study, it was found that the Carib grackle engages in forms of social learning. In foraging, they display complex beak movements when handling the food i.e. when extracting food. This behaviour is imitated by juveniles after they observe the adults. The study also found that the juveniles will also imitate the foraging behaviour of other similar birds such as zenaida doves. The same study noted that the birds adopt varied head postures while engaged in ritual vocalizations (Brown et al., 1997).

FEEDING BEHAVIOUR. The Carib grackle is described as an opportunistic forager. It feeds mainly on thrown away food items and garbage; however they also feed on small insects and other invertebrates. They are also known to eat small fish and frogs and even catch small bats in the air (Discover-tt.net, 2014). Carib grackles have been found to engage in a type of feeding behaviour known as dunking, whereby they drop their food into water as seen in Fig. 3, sometimes repeatedly and then eat it immediately after or carry it away. Studies suggest that the role of this behaviour is mainly for the softening of food to aid with ingestion (Hickey et al., 2005). The birds can be seen foraging in small groups in and around garbage dumps, rocks and on beaches (Oiseaux-birds.com, 2014). There is also the incidence of kleptoparasitism among Carib grackles. This behaviour is where one Carib grackle steals food from the mouth of a conspecific, i.e. another of its kind, at the moment when they release their food into the water. Within the context of this type of behaviour, some birds attempt to prevent others from stealing their food by holding their food in their bill while dunking as opposed to releasing it. This behaviour is observed mostly when they are surrounded by other conspecifics (Morand-Ferron et al., 2006). This bird is known to be very bold in its search for food and may even do so within very close proximity to humans. (Beauty Of Birds, 2014). When foraging, the bird will engage in scramble competition with their conspecifics, i.e. where they non-aggressively compete for food. When the Carib grackle has to extract embedded food, they have been observed to use their beak to manipulate food pieces and probe objects. They also use their beak to kill insects and lizards (Brown et al., 1997).

REPRODUCTIVE BEHAVIOUR. The males are known to raise their tails whilst singing in effort to attract females (The Trinidad and Tobago NatureLink, 2012); this behaviour is seen mainly at the tree where they nest. The behaviour can be further described by the ruffling of their plumage together with signing and the vibration of their extended wings (Oiseaux-birds.com, 2014). The nests are built by the females in colonies in the same tree. The young Carib grackles fledge, i.e. leave the nest approximately 2 weeks after hatching. This is after the female incubates the eggs (numbering 2-4, whitish in colour), for up to 12 days (Beauty Of Birds, 2014). During this time of incubation, most of the males will leave, however a small percent will remain and will help care for the newly hatched offspring (Discover-tt.net, 2014). Another bird, the shiny cowbird is known to insert their eggs into the nest of Carib grackles, however they have been observed to reject these foreign eggs the majority of the time (Oiseaux-birds.com, 2014). The Carib grackle is known to be a colonial breeder, (Beauty Of Birds 2014) however the males are seen to guard their mate during the mating season to prevent them from breeding with rivals. Dependent upon the region they are in, they tend to be monogamous or polygamous (Oiseaux-birds.com, 2014). They are known to form pairs when in their flocks. The females indicate to the male she is interested in mating by flying together with him, with the female sometimes flying ahead. They engage in singing while flying together, and this is presumed to help in bonding. The pair will often make mutual displays when together. With respect to the actual site of the nests, the female will select the location and sometimes does so before she finds a mate. She will build the nest out of twigs, leaves and grasses. The male usually does not build the nest but has been observed to aid in repairing as well as supplying materials for the nest. In the event that the female has not located a suitable spot before pairing with a male, the male will follow her as she looks. Some of the ways that the male will engage in mate guarding is by always staying close to her, i.e. remaining perched where she is perched during the mating season (Discover-tt.net, 2014).

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Fig. 2. Female Carib grackle.

[<http://photography-on-the.net/forum/showthread.php?t=241053&page=28>, downloaded 16 November 2014]



Fig. 3. Carib grackle dunking a piece of food in a water puddle.

[<http://biology.mcgill.ca/faculty/reader/images/ReaderGrackle1a.jpg>, downloaded 16 November 2014]

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