

Discouraging Black Birds

Before doing anything about black birds, give yourself some time to think about what you can and cannot live with. All living creatures on this planet somehow have to live together – that is if we want diversity of life. But that does not mean you have to live with thousands of shrieking, defecating black birds right outside your window night after night after night.

Cleon and I have flocks of Common Grackles (60 or so in each flock) who sweep through our yard each fall. For several days, our trees will be filled with them – all ‘singing’ at once. Because it is only for a short period of time, I think of their arrival as a sign of fall. They do eat a lot of seed during their stay, but their stay is short – most often 2-3 weeks. And I do not begrudge them their loud shrieks or voracious appetites. And our resident songbirds and those who are migrating through also seem tolerant. They all jostle for position around the feeders but after the grackles are gone, the other birds immediately resume their lives as though the invasion never happened.

But this is a far cry from people living in a tree-filled neighborhood and have a resident flock of thousands of black birds who roost every night and will not shut up or stop defecating. The noise. The mess. Cars and sidewalks covered with bird droppings. And such a din that you cannot hear yourself think. So, the first thing you have to decide is what can you live with. Is it a part of Mother Nature you can tolerate or even enjoy for a short term? Or is it not short term, it has become simply intolerable, and your nerves are stretched to the breaking point?

There are all sorts of websites and videos online as to what to do about annoying flocks of black birds. Here are my suggestions based on what friends have told me has worked for them – at least in part. And some of these suggestions are also from Purdue University Wildlife Conflicts and the state of Washington Fish and Wildlife.

Dispersing flocks of roosting black birds:

Before attempting any of these suggestions, you MUST talk to your neighbors and also the police – I cannot emphasize this enough. In the short term, you will be making the situation worse instead of better. However, hopefully after about 2 weeks of your interactions – each and every evening - the birds will have gotten discouraged and moved elsewhere to roost.

1. Identify the species of birds in your roosting flock – always remember flocks of black birds can be more than one species. Starting at about 30-45 minutes before the time the flock starts moving into yours and your neighbors’ trees – their roost - play recorded alarm calls and distress calls from the species you have identified through large and powerful speakers – and at top volume. You can find recordings online. Continue playing these recordings until about 45 minutes after dark. At the same time
2. As the recordings are playing, have several people stationed around the roost. If black birds still come in to the roost, allow them to land and then immediately use air horns or any noise maker that will deliver a piercing noise – including remotely setting off a car alarm of a vehicle parked under the roost – to create additional ear-splitting noise. Keep at it until the birds leave the roost. And wear ear plugs to protect your own ears!

Numbers 1 and 2 should be continued over several nights – 4-5 nights seems to be the average. And then over the next 2-3 weeks, the roost must be watched from dusk until about 45 minutes after dark to make sure the birds do not return. If they do, repeat numbers 1 and 2 together for another 4-5 nights. When I talked to my friends who have had this problem with roosting black birds, this is what worked best for them.

3. Mylar balloons can be placed so they float about 3 feet above the tops of the trees that are serving as the roost. Place about 6-8 feet apart. The difficulty is the balloons' positions have to be changed about every 3 days or the birds will become used to them and ignore them. Black birds are intelligent creatures. You cannot fool them for long.

4. Black birds like to roost close to each other. You can make the roost less attractive by hard pruning all the trees in the roost by 30-50%. I am a retired nurseryman and in my opinion, that is removing a lot of branches. If you choose to do this, understand the shape of your trees will be altered – permanently. And some trees will not survive such a hard pruning. Know what species of trees you have within the roost and talk to your local nursery experts. Ask them their advice about such a hard pruning on the trees you have and during which months it is best to prune. If you decide this is your best option, remember pruning is an art. You are sculpting the shape of the tree. Make your cuts carefully and thoughtfully. You do not want to be rid of the black birds at the price of ruining the appearance of your trees.

Black birds overwhelming your feeders:

Here is a suggestion that works for us. We have Common Grackles, Brown-headed Cowbirds, and a surprising number of Red-winged Blackbirds at our feeders and sometimes it seems like they are there all day long. We do have a fairly good-sized stationary platform feeder and this has become their favorite place to eat.

These birds are good-sized, so when they are on it, there is no room for the smaller finches, chickadees and titmice - nor will the blackbirds allow them on that feeder. I decided I did not mind a few blackbirds on that feeder, so I did not want them to completely go away, just to stop dominating that feeder and pushing the smaller birds off.

We had been using a mix of black oil sunflower seeds and white millet on that platform feeder. We changed that to only the black oil sunflower seed and added safflower seed to it. We threw a mix of the white millet and black oil sunflower seed on the ground under the feeders. Once we did that, the majority of the blackbirds started feeding on the ground under the feeders and only two or three were on the platform feeder at any time and most of the time throughout the day, the platform feeder had no blackbirds on it. The finches, chickadees, and titmice all returned to that feeder immediately. For once in my life, I actually made everyone happy! The blackbirds were happy to eat their favorite white millet on the ground and the small birds were happy to return to the platform feeder for sunflower and safflower seeds.

Other suggestions:

1. Don't use any form of corn in your feeders – not ears of corn, whole corn or cracked corn. Eliminate white millet seed. Both of these are common in seed mixtures. Always read the ingredient labels on the bags. Both of these are favorite foods of all black birds.

2. Remove any stationary feeders – black birds generally use all of these with ease.

3. Remove any large hanging feeders. Black birds generally do not like hanging feeders but if nothing else is available they will attempt to use the large ones with varying success. Starlings are fairly adept with large hanging feeders and grackles will try any feeder – they are clever.

4. Until you get the black birds to leave your feeder area, use only small hanging feeders with no perches – those made for finches. Small songbirds like chickadees, titmice, nuthatches and the Downy Woodpecker, can easily cling to feeders and eat. With the exception of starlings, black birds do not cling very well. Starlings can cling a bit, but not for long periods of time so if they do cling to your smaller hanging feeders, their time to eat is short.

And above all, whether it is black birds turning your neighborhood trees into a giant nighttime roost and privy, or black birds emptying your feeders at an alarming rate, keep your sense of humor. And use this to develop a greater sense of tolerance for nature. Diversity of life is so very important to us all.