



PLATE 1. WILD TURKEY IN PINE WOODS  
(Greatly reduced)

# A Guide to the Winter Birds of the North Carolina Sandhills

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## RUSTY BLACKBIRD. Pl. 5, page 148

*Euphagus carolinus* (Müll.). A. O. U. No. 509

**Field Identification.** A blackbird slightly smaller than a Robin, and marked with pale yellow or white eyes. The males are black and the accompanying females are slate colored.

**Description.** In winter the plumage is bluish black with the feathers of the upper parts widely tipped with rusty or rufous; a buffy line over eye; in spring and summer the entire plumage is a uniform glossy black. The female is slate colored above and duller below; in spring and summer entire plumage more glossy. Eyes of both sexes are pale yellow or white at all times. Total length  $9\frac{1}{2}$  inches.

**Distribution.** I did not find this Blackbird at all common in the Sandhills but occasional flocks were seen throughout the winter. At this season other individuals of this species go as far south as the Gulf coast; in summer they live in our extreme northeastern states, and in Canada as far north as northern Ungava, Keewatin, northern Mackenzie and Alaska. In the western United States the Rusty Blackbirds are replaced by other forms.

**Habits.** During the winter from November to February there was a flock of fifty Rusty Blackbirds almost constantly about the fields near the Pinehurst Dairy. This flock was composed of both sexes, but began to split up and scatter about the first of March. Although these birds were usually on the ground, they often alighted on low trees—oaks, pines, gums, dogwoods and sycamores—and on board fences and the wires and posts of wire fences.

Occasionally they are seen on race-courses or golf links, and often about streams or the thickets over streams. Still it is quite noticeable that these birds prefer the uplands with other blackbirds more than any other locality.

Rusty Blackbirds on the ground walk, and run nimbly, with a nodding of their heads forward and backward in time to their own steps. As compared with other blackbirds, this species is perhaps tamer and certainly more quiet, composed and dignified. When hunting across the ground, members of the flock are continually walking and running, and frequently individual birds fly a few feet to a position at the front. While Rusty Blackbirds fly in dense compact flocks all winter, and appear to enjoy the

society of other members of their own kind, they are less apt to join other species. When in flocks composed of several species, the Rusty Blackbirds usually split off into separate flocks composed of their own kind. But at times they vary this and join flocks of Meadowlarks and Starlings; but on the other hand Starlings, Cowbirds and Red-winged Blackbirds more often join the Rusty Blackbirds. During the winter these Blackbirds are also seen temporarily with Bluebirds, Juncos, Doves and Horned Larks.

While the flocks of Rusty Blackbirds are more dense and compact than most other species, they are not so much so as those of Red-winged Blackbirds. A flock in flight moves steadily onward, but the individual birds undulate up and down, or swing from side to side, so that the relative positions constantly change and give the flock a rippling appearance. They fly either against the wind or with it. In the latter case, just before alighting on ground or trees they wheel and come up to their perches against the wind. In its minor points, the flight of these birds is thrush-like. Rusty Blackbirds are quiet during the winter, but the song also suggests a thrush rather than a blackbird.

During the winter the number of Rusty Blackbirds varies a good deal from time to time. At about the middle of February they begin to leave, presumably on their regular migration. By February 5, 1927, the males were in spring plumage but perhaps not as bright as they became later.

These Blackbirds have a more varied diet and they feed less on the ground than other blackbirds; and varied diet is probably the reason that they are more widely scattered. In addition to the seeds, waste grain and insects usually eaten by all blackbirds, the Rusty Blackbirds add fruits from the sour gum in December, January and February, and dogwood berries in January. In February, Rusty Blackbirds feed in cowpea fields on insects, but do not disturb any waste peas that may be present.

#### PURPLE GRACKLE

*Quiscalus quiscula quiscula* (Linn.). *A. O. U. No. 511*

**Field Identification.** A brilliantly colored black bird larger than a Robin. The purple, or blue, heads and necks are distinctive; so are the yellow eyes of the males, the iridescence of the

plumage, the straight level flight, and the long bills. After the middle of February grackles are seen tending strongly toward the bronze form. Probably both forms are present then, the Bronze Grackle being a migrant in North Carolina. Habits are the same for both forms.

**Description.** The male's head, neck and upper breast are purple; back greenish; wings and tail purple or bluish black; all the upperparts show a varying amount of bluish, greenish or purplish iridescence; underparts are dull black; eyes pale yellow. Female are duller but may show a trifling amount of iridescence. Total length 12-14 inches.

**Distribution.** Rare in the Sandhills during winter and summer, but more common during the migrations. In winter, members of this species range south of the Delaware valley as far as Georgia, Alabama and Tennessee; but in summer they live as far north as Long Island and the Hudson valley, and west as far as the Alleghany Mountains.

**Habits.** A Purple Grackle stayed with the blackbirds near the Pinehurst Dairy and across by the stock-yards during the winter of 1926-27. At times it was seen in the roadways, on bare ground, in clover fields, in alfalfa fields, on grain stubble, and under the plants of an old pea field. Although generally on the ground, the Purple Grackle sometimes perched on dead trees, poles, fence post and fence wires. During the migration period in late February and early March other Purple Grackles visited the dooryards of Aberdeen and Pine Bluff.

When Purple Grackles are on the ground, they walk with head moving forward and back, and bodies swinging from side to side in rhythm with their footsteps. If a wind is blowing they prefer to face it, for, whenever the grackles walk with it, the wind tumbles their tails, wings, and long feathers most disconcertingly. Occasionally, these birds jerk up their tails quickly and then lower them more slowly. Aside from this nervous movement of their tails grackles are deliberate, erect and dignified in their movements.

The Purple Grackle seen near Pinehurst Dairy was alone most of the winter, but after the arrival of others about the middle of February, they were always in small flocks. Toward other species the grackles are unsocial but are sometimes seen temporarily with