

YBY

Young Birder of the Year Contest

Writing Module

Essays and Artwork by

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Remember when you first ventured into the field as a novice birder? The excitement you felt as you made each discovery or added that new bird to your life list? Encouraging and educating birders is an integral part of the ABA and its mission, and fostering a love for birds and conservation with young birders is especially crucial.

Young birders are often isolated from their peers, watching and studying birds on their own. Motivating and encouraging these scattered and sometimes secluded young birders to get into the field and improve their birding proficiency and enjoyment can pose a challenge. One of the ways the ABA found to do just that was by creating a contest, the ABA/Leica Young Birder of the Year (YBY), that would spark young birders' imaginations as well as inspire them to pursue and develop their birding skills.

The YBY contest has become a friendly and spirited competition that combines prize incentives such as high-quality Leica optics, scholarships, bird books, and gear with advice from professional birders and ornithologists—along with the possibility of future publication of their work. As with all things, the YBY has evolved. It now consists of four individual modules: Field Notebook, Writing, Photography, and Illustration. Each individual module promotes the enhancement of a different aspect of birding, and all stimulate and build skills that the participants will use and cultivate throughout their lives.

The Writing Module is especially valuable, as it gives young birders a venue for analysis, interpretation, and speculation as well as an opportunity to use their writing as a creative pursuit. Being able to communicate well is the key to success in the professional world, and the Writing Module provides young birders with excellent, in-depth exposure to the craft of writing.

Anna Wiker is now a 15-year-old birder residing in Hopedale, Ohio. Her poignant essays, written when she was 13, are wonderful examples of the fine writing that some young birders produce. They have been lightly edited for publication here in *Birding*; also, Anna's thorough literature citations of statements regarding nesting ecology, migration strategies, etc., have been deleted in the versions of her essays that appear here.

Anna has participated in the contest over the past few years and was the 2005 YBY second place winner, 10–13 age group. In addition to being a prolific essayist, Anna is an accomplished artist and has entered several of her drawings in the YBY Contest. We look forward to seeing more of Anna's artwork and writing in the future.

The YBY contest has had well over 500 young people enter and then fine-tune different facets of their birding. Some of the previous contest participants have gone on to careers in birding and conservation and have become leaders in the birding community; some have even come full circle and participated as contest judges. Whether you began birding as an adult or a youngster, you can no doubt appreciate the dedication of these young birders.

Please visit the YBY website <aba.org/yb/yby> for information about the contest and to see more of the incredible work of our participants. Special thanks to our sponsor, Leica Sport Optics, and the dedicated judges we have had over the past 10 years!

— Lori L. Fujimoto
Education Programs Manager, ABA

Grackle Seasons

The sky was streaked with scraps of white, some of them airplane tracks and some of them genuine clouds. Since the sun was setting, they were shades of purple and pink in the west, but in the east above the road they were almost the same pale white-cerulean as the sky is on an August evening. The woods that surrounded our property were fast fading into the dark silhouettes that they would be by the time it was entirely dark. Yes, by every indication, this was summer at its prime—at least to those of us who believe that summer is more than popsicles and lounging in the pool. Besides, it was getting too cool to swim.



There is a fairly well-known poem by Rachel Fields entitled “Something Told the Wild Geese” which finishes with the following stanza:

*Something told the wild geese
It was time to fly,—
Summer sun was on their wings,
Winter in their cry.*

Grackles are very rarely if ever hailed in poetry like Fields’ prophetic geese, but the grackles knew that summer is not eternal. Poetry and prose have long lauded wild geese, but few have written about the feeling you get when you see hundreds upon hundreds of grackles leaving.

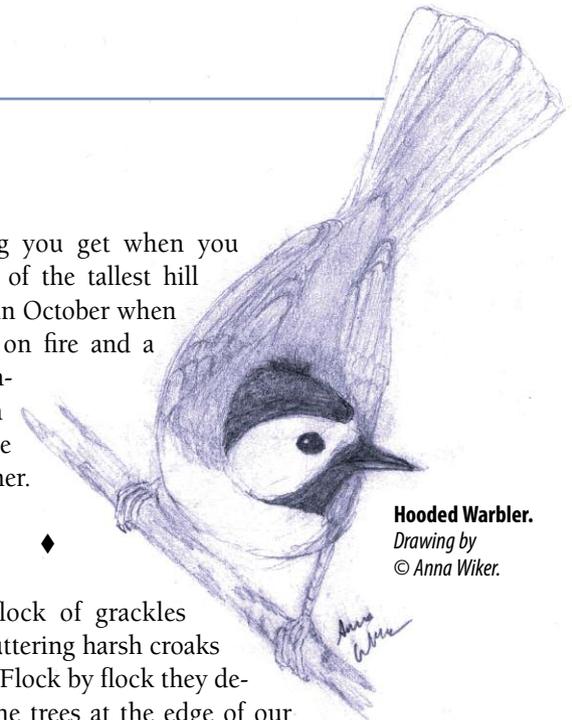
Kind of like a mix between the feeling you get when you’re riding in a car and you go over a hill at 65 mph—compared

to the feeling you get when you stand on top of the tallest hill you can find in October when the trees are on fire and a breeze is running through them. If you’ve ever done either.

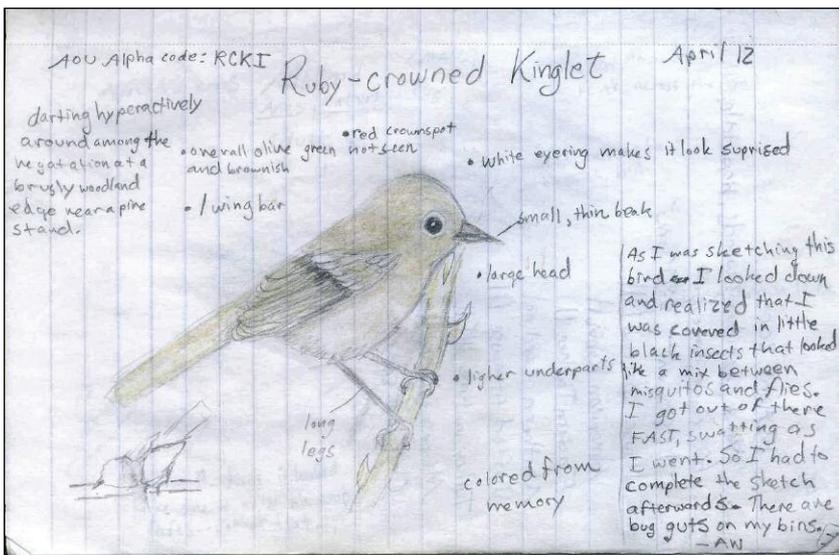


Flock after flock of grackles passed over, uttering harsh croaks as they went. Flock by flock they descended on the trees at the edge of our property, loading some branches so heavily that they bent alarmingly, forcing the grackles to roost elsewhere. The result was a flurry of croaking black that had spread itself over the trees like a huge tattered rag caught on the breeze. Their numbers continued to multiply as more flocks joined them—the grackles from miles around that had come in the spring, along with their young.

Here in southeastern Ohio—more specifically, the one-and-a-half square miles around which we live—the grackles arrive in late February or early March. Their flocks tend to be smaller than those of autumn, and they soon disperse to their respective nesting sites, one of which I know. Grackles nest in colonies with usually 10–30 pairs, often in conifers and near water. This place fits the bill. It’s a coniferous thing near water, anyway, right at the edge of The Pond across the road—an eastern white pine.



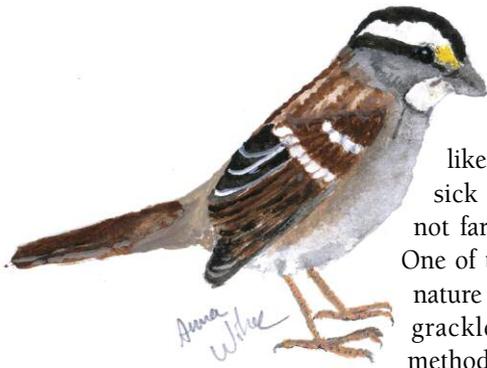
Hooded Warbler.
Drawing by
© Anna Wiker.



Ruby-crowned Kinglet. From the field notebook of © Anna Wiker.

I have never seen the nests, but from a summer’s worth of grackle notes, I can make an educated guess and say that there were eleven or twelve nests in the white pine this season. For all of the years that we’ve lived here—going on five—Common Grackles have nested there, and although I have wondered about it and guessed at it and read up on it and observed the grackles themselves, I still cannot say whether we are dealing with the same grackles or their descendants that return every year. Individual grackles are hard to tell apart, especially if they won’t hold still.

Actual nesting can begin as early as March. To attract a mate, the standard male grackle finds a tree, often an evergreen. Thereupon he fluffs his feathers, droops his wings, and



White-throated Sparrow.
Drawing by © Anna Wiker.

thrusts his head out like a person about to be sick and makes a noise not far removed from that. One of the small miracles of nature is why there are any grackles left if that's the method that the male employs to woo his love. But since grackles are one of the

most common birds in their range, it must work.

The nest itself is a bulky affair constructed of grass, weed stalks, and the like, sometimes reinforced by mud in the inside and lined with feathers, grass, and other debris. The entire ungainly creation is constructed by the female in about eleven days. The eggs are pale grayish green and scrawled with dark brownish markings, incubated by the female for anywhere from eleven days to two weeks. Fledging is at a little under three weeks after hatching.

During this period, other birds may be beginning to nest as well. The nefarious grackle has a record of pilfering other birds' nestlings and eating them; so wherever a grackle goes, it is accompanied by a band of enraged avian parents who want it to go somewhere else. I have seen all manner of birds mobbing grackles—orioles, hummingbirds, phoebes, and kingbirds, to name a few. Oddly enough, I have never seen those little bundles of mobbiness, chickadees and titmice, anywhere near a grackle. Perhaps it is because the paridae retire to the woods during the summer and grackles prefer more open places. They are often seen foraging on lawns; here, they wait in trees while we mow the lawn and then when we're done they fly down to eat insects that have been disturbed.

Another favorite grackle food source is the muddy edges of the same pond that the white pine colony is situated by. There they feast on the bountiful insects, aquatic and otherwise, the tadpoles of frogs and toads, as well as the occasional salamander. One time, I even saw a grackle take a small minnow out of our creek.

When grackles forage, they don't hop like the robins that often feed in the vicinity. I have read that grackles walk, but a more accurate word would be *strut*. I have never seen a grackle that didn't look as though it owned the entire known universe. Added to this arrogant demeanor, they seem to have a permanent sour expression, caused in part by the downward curve of their gapes and heavy bills and those glaring yellow eyes.

Grackles are one of those creatures that look better closer up, though. Once I was walking the dog and I saw a car

hit a grackle that was flying low over the road. It was dead when I got to it, and presumably had died on impact. It was an adult male, and even though grackles weren't my favorite birds I couldn't help admiring the iridescent sheen that turned the otherwise lackluster black feathers into a blaze of glossy bronze, green, and blue when light shone off it. Even those eyes that caused that sour expression glittered like twin suns.

Too bad it was dead.

Grackles probably only have one brood every year around here, because all the fledglings are concentrated around June and I have only rarely seen them in any other month. They don't seem to hang around their parents for too long; almost three quarters of the young grackles I observed at my feeder in late June were feeding themselves and unescorted by an adult. About a month after this time, the grackles pick up shop and leave for the winter, except



Cedar Waxwings. Watercolor and pencil by © Anna Wiker.

for one that stayed last year. It was a male, a big fellow who dominated the feeder whenever he was there. Even though the bird was handicapped by a broken or otherwise injured



Blue-winged Warblers. From the field notebook of © Anna Wiker.

leg that forced him to hop around on one foot, he was an imposing character whom the other feeder birds feared and respected. Except for the Blue Jays. Which was hardly any surprise, since I have not yet met a Blue Jay that respected anything or anyone.

The leg earned him the name in our human household of Long John Silver, the preferred and shorter version of this being Silver. He was generally a loner; often during snowstorms I could look out the window and see his hunched black shape in some bare tree at the edge of the wood. But he never seemed to mind, even though by nature grackles are social creatures, at least among their own kind.

He kept regular hours for appearing at the feeder—twice in the morning, twice in the afternoon, and just before dark, respectively—and rarely failed to keep them, but unlike the other feeder birds he never became used to humans. To the sparrows, cardinals, goldfinches, and woodpeckers, I was the large thing covered in scarves that stumbled out the door at 6:30 in the morning with two large buckets of birdseed and therefore to be tolerated, since food came afterwards. To Silver, I was a malevolent beast that flushed him from the feeder during the coldest hours of the dawn when sustenance was most needed.

One morning in late January, Silver didn't come to the feeder and I never saw him again. Rather than believing the likely reason, that the handicapped grackle had met up with some fatal mishap, I prefer to think that the lengthening days had gotten into his blood and sent him wandering.

Silver was just one of a number of Common Grackles that now winter in Ohio. Historically, grackles wintered only rarely, but they began increasing after 1900, so that between 1920 and 1940, they were uncommon winter residents, most flocks being smaller than twelve or so birds but with occasional larger groups anywhere from 100 to 400 strong. Ten years later, they had become regular winter residents, and now large flocks of wintering grackles are reported frequently.

Maybe this year, another will stay at the feeder. Maybe one of the birds that were then flocking in the trees would stay behind, unnoticed until some snowstorm in December, when there would be a single wintering grackle at the feeders...

To read the conclusion of this essay, and to read three additional essays by Anna Wiker, please visit the ABA website <aba.org/pubs/birding/archives/vol39no3p25w1.pdf>.