

AUG. 15, 1976

Mothballs Used by Grackles

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Mothballs, dogs, grackles and ants are an odd assortment but they fit into a story of an interesting and seldom reported behavior of birds. Mrs. Jim Clark, 4808 Green Meadow Lane, writes:

"We've been scattering mothballs on the ground under some of our shrubs to keep dogs from killing them. (It does keep the dogs away.) From time to time we have found mothballs in other parts of the yard and wondered how they could have gotten there.

"Then one day from the kitchen window I saw a grackle with a mothball in its beak. I watched, unbelievably, as he groomed his feathers with it. Then two other grackles joined the first and they, too, picked up mothballs and stroked their tail feathers and under their wings.

"Since then we have seen this behavior on several occasions. My husband mentioned it to Mrs. Christenberry of Powell who recommended the mothballs to us, and she said her grackles do the same thing. She thinks, and so do we, that they use the mothballs to repel mites or lice or whatever external parasites infest birds."



GRACKLE

THIS BEHAVIOR has been called "anting" by ornithologists because many different species of birds do the same thing with an ant or some other insect that will exude a pungent or aromatic fluid.

A blue jay in my yard a few years ago went into such contortions trying to rub an ant at the base of his tail feathers that he stepped on his tail and tumbled over backward — but held on to the ant.

A crow has an easier way. It simply sits down on an active ant hill and lets the angry ants scramble through its feathers. Studies of the odd habit with captive birds have found that a variety of materials will be used by some birds in the same way as the ant, and these include orange peel, raw onion, vinegar, cigaret butts and — of course — mothballs.

Mrs. Clark's insect repellent theory seems logical, but so far no explanation has been generally accepted by ornithologists.

THE KIRTLAND'S WARBLER gained a bit in its struggle against extinction during the past year, according to Harold Mayfield of Waterville, Ohio, leading authority on the bird which is so scarce and so small that, as Mr. Mayfield has said, all of them would fit into a large shopping bag.

Nesting nowhere in the world but among young jack pines in North Central Michigan, only 167 singing males could be found by a group headed by Mr. Mayfield in early summer of 1974. Last year the number was just barely better at 179.

But in this Bicentennial year the num-

ber of singing males most appropriately was an even 200. Assuming all had mates, the total would be 400 birds.

The Kirtland's warbler is believed to spend the winter in the Bahama Islands because quite a few were "collected" there before the turn of the century. But Mr. Mayfield said an expedition from the Carnegie Foundation spent five weeks there during the past wintering season and failed to find even one of the warblers.

"THE AIR WAS FULL of tree swallows, plus a few martins, in front of the Tea Room at Cove Lake," writes Mrs. Earl F. Olson of Norris. "We ate supper there and I didn't know what I was eating — I was so enthralled with the antics of the birds.

"Earlier I had been told there were common egrets up there so we went to the picnic area to look, but there were no egrets. However, the dusky mallards put there by a sportsman's club have learned to pan-handle the picnickers. One pair came right to my feet."

Tree swallows are smaller than martins and nest farther north but are starting south now. Normally during this late summer migration they are uncommon or rare here. Two pairs nested near Norris Dam a few years ago.