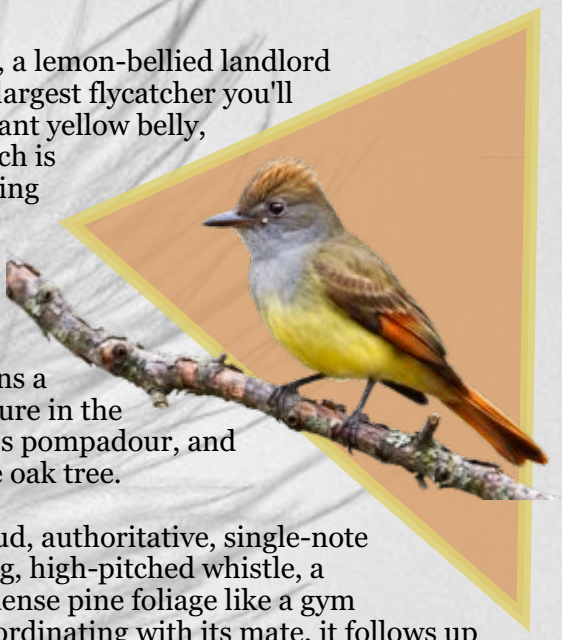
Bird Break



Ah, November mornings on the lanai, and at Spring Park; there's autumn in the morning air, as we're serenaded by the usual suspects: the odd bullfrog, a NAS JAX flyover, a leaf blower starting five minutes too early, and those birds! With over 520 recorded species in our neck of the woods, fall brings a fresh seasonal shuffle: migrants passing through, winter visitors arriving, and year-round locals holding down the fort with an unbothered attitude. Armed with a fresh cup of coffee (in cup or travel mug) and open ears, let's meet two aerial icons taking center stage this month.

The **Great Crested Flycatcher** is the canopy's undisputed drama queen, a lemon-bellied landlord with a bushy crest and a wildly bizarre fetish for shed snakeskins. It is the largest flycatcher you'll spot in our woods, rocking an olive-brown jacket, a pale gray throat, a vibrant yellow belly, and a crest of feathers it erects whenever it feels even mildly offended, which is always. It perches at the very top of exposed branches or light posts, scanning the airspace with the intense focus of an air traffic controller on their fifth espresso, before darting out to snatch dragonflies and beetles straight out of mid-air. But its real claim to fame is its interior design choices: when building a nest inside a tree cavity or bird box, it insists on weaving a sloughed-off snakeskin into the material. Whether this is meant to terrify raccoons, intimidate squirrels, or simply serve as avant-garde decor remains a matter of heated debate among ornithologists. It looks at every other creature in the yard with profound disapproval, fluffs its head feathers into an angry 1980s pompadour, and fiercely defends its territory as if it personally holds the deed to your entire oak tree.



Song and Call: The vocalization is not a delicate, liquid melody; it is a loud, authoritative, single-note trumpet blast designed to clear the room. Its signature call is a sharp, rising, high-pitched whistle, a resounding ***"WHEEEEP!"*** or ***"WHEEP-WHEEP!"***, that cuts through dense pine foliage like a gym teacher's whistle at Monday morning practice. When mildly agitated or coordinating with its mate, it follows up with a series of quick, dry, rolling clacks: ***"whit-whit-whit-whit"*** or a raspy chatter that sounds like a miniature chainsaw being pull-started in the canopy. It doesn't do quiet background music; it delivers a sonic jump-scare that reminds you that while it may weigh less than a golf ball, it expects full compliance from everything under its airspace.



The **Boat-tailed Grackle** (at Spring Park) is the iridescent mobster of the marsh and parking lot, a hyper-dramatic avian opera singer strutting around in a tuxedo three sizes too big. If the common crow is a sleek secret agent, the male Boat-tailed Grackle is a flamboyant theatrical villain who demands all eyes on him. Draped in glossy, oil-slick black feathers that shimmer with brilliant purple and peacock-blue iridescence in the Florida sun, it possesses striking pale eyes and a ridiculously oversized, keel-shaped tail that trails behind it like a floor-length evening gown. It struts across golf course water hazards, dock railings, and Publix parking lots with an unbothered, swaggering march, holding court over any discarded French fry within a fifty-yard radius. During courtship or territorial disputes, the male performs an outrageous physical display: puffing its chest to twice its natural size, spreading its wings, pointing its beak straight up to the heavens, and vibrating every feather on its body until it looks like it's undergoing a minor electrical event. It has zero fear of humans, views golf carts as personal chauffeurs, and considers any unattended picnic table a buffet laid out in its honor.

Song and Call: Calling a grackle's vocalization a "song" is a generous stretch of the English language, as it sounds less like music and more like a dial-up modem having a meltdown. Lacking the sweet, liquid phrasing of songbirds, it unleashes a bizarre, loud symphony of mechanical noises: harsh clacks, sharp whistles, metallic clicks, and a long, descending squeak that resembles a rusty gate hinge being forced open: ***"JEER! JEER! chack-chack-chack-krrzzzt!"*** During its head-up puffing display, it produces a strange, wing-whirring rustle accompanied by a sharp, piercing whistle that sounds like a B-movie laser gun from 1957. It is loud, unapologetic, and thoroughly chaotic, the sound of a bird that knows it dominates the local ecosystem and couldn't care less about your morning peace and quiet.

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*Full disclosure: my thanks to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology for their brilliant '**Merlin Bird ID**' app, which uses your phone to identify the birds in your backyard by their calls! You gotta try this! The rest I noodled up on my own. You know, before coffee when I have no sense!*

- EDITOR
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