

AT A GLANCE

April 2001



Photograph by Wayne R. Petersen

The April mystery photograph depicts a rather slim, dark bird with a long tail, rather long legs (for a passerine), a prominently curved upper mandible, and a pale throat and underpart coloration in contrast with darker upperparts. The obviously long tail and thickness and length of the legs suggest that this is not a terribly small bird. The combination of dark coloration on the back, wings, and tail, combined with the overall impression of largish size, indicate that the mystery bird is probably a member of the blackbird family, *Icteridae*. Corvids, such as crows and ravens, can be ruled out as possibilities because of the pale coloration on the underparts of the featured species.

Assuming that the pictured bird is a blackbird, several species can at once be eliminated. The bill shape and long tail readily remove the chunky-billed, uniformly colored female Brown-headed Cowbird as a candidate, while the absence of ventral streaking also take the juvenile cowbird, as well as female and immature male Red-winged Blackbird, out of the picture. Similarly, a female Yellow-headed Blackbird would show a few dusky streaks at the sides of the upper breast, along with a sharp contrast between a light-colored upper breast and a completely dark lower breast and belly. The pale supercilium and lighter underparts of the pictured blackbird are most suggestive of an immature or female Rusty Blackbird in winter plumage; however, the bill size and shape, long tail, apparent lack of pale (brownish) coloration on the back, and absence of a broad and strongly contrasting supercilium do not point in this direction. Similarly, the rare (in Massachusetts) Brewer's Blackbird would possess an

even finer bill than a Rusty Blackbird and would never exhibit the strong dorsal/ventral color contrast shown by the mystery blackbird.

With the above species eliminated, the only remaining choices are between Common Grackle, Boat-tailed Grackle, and Great-tailed Grackle. Since grackles all have longer tails and heavier bills than any of the above-mentioned blackbirds, all three species need to be considered. Adult Common Grackles in virtually any plumage are more uniform in coloration than the pictured blackbird, and adults often appear to have a hooded effect produced by their highly iridescent head, nape, and chest feathers. Juvenile Common Grackles are uniformly dusky in color. With Common Grackle removed from the list of identification possibilities, the choice becomes one between Boat-tailed Grackle and Great-tailed Grackle – either of which would be a rarity in the Bay State.

Distinguishing between North America's two largest grackles in the genus *Quiscalus* can be challenging, even for experienced observers. It is safe to say that because the mystery grackle has a pale throat and breast it is clearly a female, since males are uniformly glossy black. With this in mind, it is important to note that the pale supercilium gradually fades into the back of the crown and nape and does not provide a sharp contrast with the crown, which is a feature characteristic of female Great-tailed Grackles. Additionally, the coloration on the underparts is notably pale and extensive, appearing to gradually darken only in the area of the lower chest, rather than showing a dark cast to the entire upper breast and belly in contrast with the light throat — another feature of female Great-tailed Grackles. Finally, an examination of the shape of the pictured bird's head reveals a rounded appearance, especially to the back of the crown, which is in marked contrast to the notably flat-headed appearance typical of a female Great-tailed Grackle. Clearly, all indications are that the mystery blackbird is a female Boat-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus major*).

One additional observation is to note that the iris coloration appears to be dark. This feature, when able to be seen clearly, is a reliable method for distinguishing Boat-tailed from Great-tailed Grackles, which typically have bold white eyes. An important caveat to this feature, however, is the fact that Boat-tailed Grackle populations breeding on the Atlantic Coast north of Florida have bright pale eyes, even though most birds nesting along the Gulf Coast and in peninsular Florida have darkish eyes. This is an interesting case where eye color undoubtedly functions as an important isolating mechanism in areas where the ranges of Boat-tailed and Great-tailed Grackle overlap.

There is a single sight record of a large, *Quiscalus* grackle in Massachusetts; however, the specific identification of that individual as a Boat-tailed Grackle was rejected by the Massachusetts Avian Records Committee (MARC) because the possibility of the wide-ranging Great-tailed Grackle could not be eliminated. Although Boat-tailed Grackles nest as close to the Bay State as coastal Connecticut and Long Island, New York, their presence in Massachusetts has yet to be confirmed. Birders should remain on the lookout for this large, tidewater grackle in salt marsh areas, particularly in southern coastal areas during spring. The Boat-tailed Grackle in the photo was captured on film by the author in Florida. Wayne R. Petersen

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Photograph by Roger S. Everett



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

Bird Observer Flashback: September/October 1974

Birding at the Prudential Center by Henry T. Wiggin

Henry Wiggin describes an astonishing selection of birds discovered surrounding the Prudential Center in downtown Boston, including this anecdote:

October 1, 1970: One of the maintenance men rescued a Common Nighthawk that was drowning in the moat. He didn't know what to do with the soggy goatsucker — Ah, that crazy little birdwatcher would know what to do with it. The trouble was that he thought that I was on the 43rd floor (I'm on the 45th). So up he came on the elevator with the reviving nighthawk starting to flap its wings and spreading water in all directions. The maintenance man, who could speak maybe 15 words of English, strode steadily ahead, in through an office door, and proudly presented the bedraggled bird to the President of a multi-million dollar corporation. After five minutes of pandemonium, the maintenance man took back his unwanted gift, went back down the elevator, out the door, and let the bird fly off.