

The Return of the Great-tailed Grackle

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illustrations by Nancy McGowan* **

The recent Supplement (*Auk*: 90: 411-19, 1973) to the A.O.U. Check-list of North American Birds, Fifth Edition, 1957, once again recognizes a differentiation on the species level between the Boat-tailed and Great-tailed Grackles. Early authors argued this difference, others "lumped" the two, and a variety of nomenclature has been, in the past, applied to both forms. It is now decreed once again that the Boat-tailed, *Cassidix major*, and the Great-tailed, *Cassidix mexicanus*, are distinct species. Confusion over how to handle the former *mexicanus* race of the Boat-tailed Grackle is now relegated to unfortunate editors who must update the bird books.

along the Eastern seaboard, through Florida, and along the Gulf Coast to mid-Texas. The Great-tailed is currently found in Mexico, Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arizona. The two species co-exist in a narrow belt from western Louisiana to the southwestern limit of the Boat-tailed's range near Corpus Christi, Texas.

Robert Selander and Donald Giller, in an exhaustive article (*Condor*, 63: 29-86, 1961), reported no evidence of interbreeding in this range of sympatry. Observations indicate that although the species do co-exist, they occupy separate niches and competition is minimal. These grackles have habitat preferences so distinct that it is almost safe to identify them by location, outside their small common range.



Fig. 1. Young grackle. *Cassidix* sp.

HABITAT

Boat-taileds prefer open coastal marsh near large bodies of brackish or salt water; generally well away from the proximity of man. They are seldom found more than a few miles inland.

Great-taileds are only incidentally found along the coast where suitable conditions exist, and are far more common inland. They prefer a golf course-like environment. That is, semi-open country with scattered large trees for roosting and nesting. Great-taileds thrive around people, and congregate in cities, parks and farmyards. They generally avoid dense woods and forest.

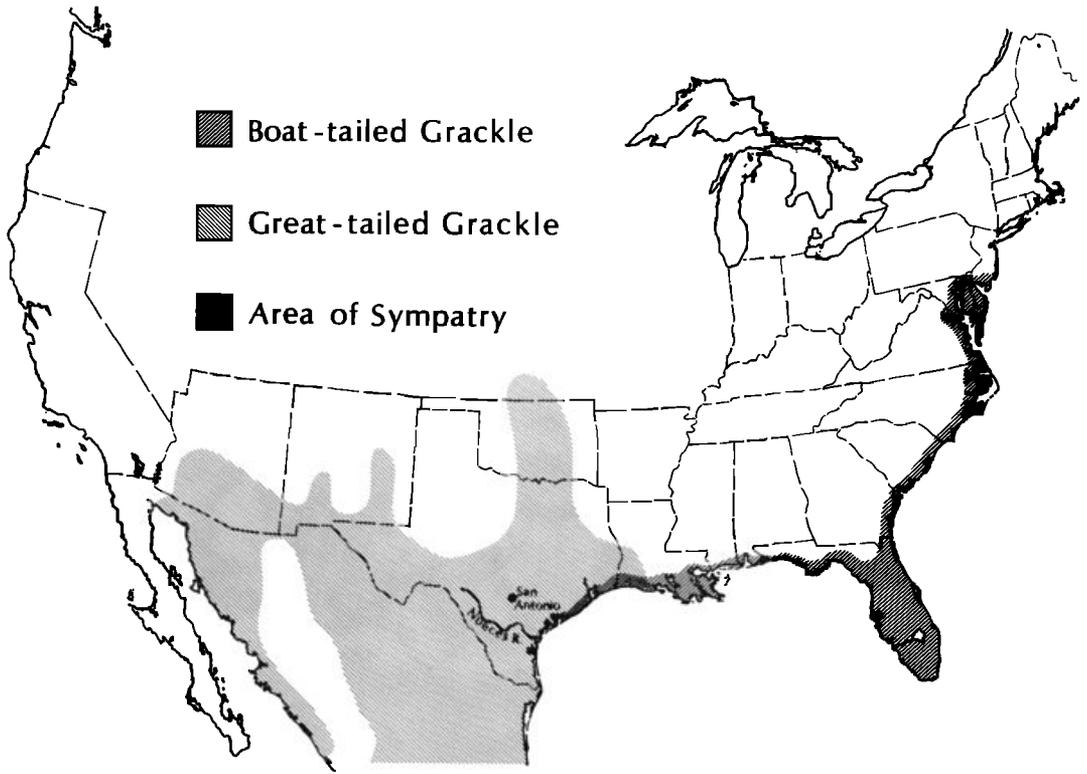
In winter, both species sometimes stray to out-of-character locations. While neither species is a true winter migrant, the Great-tailed may retreat from its northern outposts, while the Boat-tailed occasionally drifts inland along large rivers.

RANGES

Boat-tailed Grackles occur in coastal marshes

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FOOD

Grackles eat almost anything and are true omnivores. Although they have been seen wading for fish, and flycatching, both birds mostly forage in open fields. Selander reported observing Boat-taileds and Great-taileds feeding together and there was no discernible difference in style or choice of menu. Foraging is a social event, particularly in winter, when large flocks are often seen in the company of other birds with similar feeding habits.

THE GREAT-TAILED INVASION

Records from the 1800s to date indicate that Boat-taileds have been relatively stable in the range previously described, with minor adjustments along the Texas coast. Early records listed them as far west as Galveston. Recently they have abandoned the immediate vicinity of Galveston and skipped down to reside near Port Lavaca, Texas.

In contrast, movement of *mexicanus* has been dramatic. In 1864, the Great-tailed Grackle was not found north or east of the Nueces River (Dresser, H.E., *Ibis*, n.s. 1:312-330, 466-495, 1865). It began breeding in San Antonio about 1912 and the invasion was on.

Following scouts which appeared years in advance of colonization, settlers arrived in Austin,

Texas in 1925. Strays in Fort Worth in 1944 were followed by breeders in 1952. By 1953 Texas was well colonized and scouts were seen in Alva, Oklahoma. The advance is continuing, and Great-taileds established themselves in Kansas about 1964.

Along the Texas coast, Great-taileds reached Galveston about 1925, here making their first recorded contact with Boat-taileds. Great-taileds are now breeding in Cameron and Colcasieu parishes, in western Louisiana (Lowery, G.H., Jr. *Louisiana Birds*, Third Ed. p 548, 1975). The Great-taileds' dislike for woodlands has kept them out of much of inland East Texas.

Both Edgar Kincaid (*Texas Fish & Game*, Feb., 1958) and Selander speculate that man's alteration of Texas' vegetation assisted *mexicanus'* move north. Irrigated farms, cleared pastures and shade trees created a more attractive habitat than thick native brush. Similarly, towns with shade trees made the coastal belt more attractive than the original salt marsh.

The Boat-tailed has not apparently suffered from the Great-taileds' intrusion, but the Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula*, has. Originally an Austin resident, the Common Grackle is now only an occasional visitor. Common Grackles require forest, so that land clearing may have reduced their numbers, but Kincaid feels that com-

*Illustrations on reverse
(Not all to the same scale).*

*Male Great-tailed Grackle, *Cassidix mexicanus*. High intensity display*

Male Great-tailed Grackle

Female Great-tailed Grackle

From paintings by Nancy McGowan





*Illustrations on reverse
(Not all to the same scale).*

Male Boat-tailed Grackle, Cassidix major. High intensity display

Male Boat-tailed Grackle

Female Boat-tailed Grackle



Fig. 2. Male Boat-tailed Grackles, head-up display.

petition is also a factor. Apparently Common Grackles (11 inches) are no match for the larger Great-taileds (16 inches).

THE GREAT-TAILED VERSUS THE WHITE-WINGED DOVE

While South Texas brush clearing programs assisted the Great-tailed Grackle, the White-winged Dove, *Zenaida asiatica*, population suffered. Since the dove's decline coincided with the Great-tailed's prosperity, the grackle was made the villain. Although documented cases of grackles preying on dove eggs do exist, wholesale destruction of nesting habitat is the major factor.

IDENTIFICATION

Differentiating between Boat-tailed and Great-tailed Grackles is considerably easier than distinguishing, for example, between Eastern and Western Meadowlarks. Eye color is the most reliable field mark, particularly where the two species co-exist. Boat-taileds have dark eyes (both sexes) whereas both sexes of adult Great-taileds have yellow eyes. First year Great-taileds have dark eyes, however, and are easily misidentified. Mature male Great-taileds have wide yellow iris rings visible from a considerable distance with the unaided eye. The female's iris is not as wide and can be overlooked.

A subspecies of the Boat-tailed, *C. major torreyi*, occurring along the Atlantic coast, is described as having yellow eyes. This subspecies is not reported along the Texas-Louisiana coast, so that yellow-eyed birds in this area can be classed as Great-taileds. Similarly, Great-taileds do not occur on the Atlantic coast where all yellow-eyed birds are surely the Boat-tailed species.

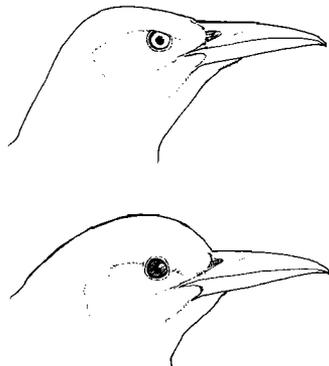


Fig. 3. Distinctive profiles: Great-tailed Grackle ♂ (top), Boat-tailed Grackle ♂.

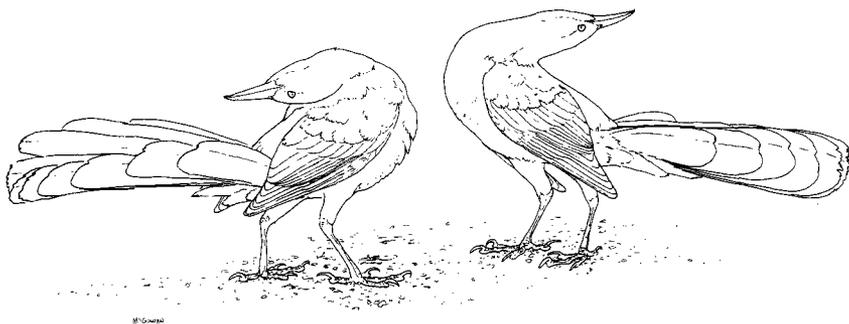


Fig. 4. Male Great-tailed Grackles, head-up display, high intensity.

Tail length is a good field mark for males. True to its name, the Great-tailed has a tail longer than, while the Boat-tailed's tail is shorter than its body. Other than length, their tails are similar, forming a pronounced vee or keel.

More subtle male traits are coloration and head shape. In brilliant sunlight, the Great-tailed reflects a purple sheen and has a glossy flat forehead. The Boat-tailed casts a blue-green sheen and its dull, almost fuzzy, head is round in profile.

Although individuals vary, the typical Great-tailed is larger than its counterpart (Selander *op. cit.*)

Both females are brown rather than black, with paler sepia breasts. The female Boat-tailed is lighter in color and slightly smaller. As with males, the most reliable field mark is eye color.

DISPLAYS

The grackles' most interesting characteristics are the male vocalizations and displays. These traits are species distinctive.

Grackles in good voice have been described as sounding like "breaking sticks, rattles, wheezes, whistles and shrieks" (Kincaid). Selander thought their song sounded like "chwechwe (repeated) phrase which is accompanied by an untuned hissing sound". In fact it is all of these and more, and always loud. The Great-tailed, louder of the two, is known for its long shrill warring "queeee—". Boat-taileds usually use shorter, more guttural phrases.

Males perform elaborate visual displays for the females. While perched, both species fan their tails, ruff up their body feathers and droop their wings. To this the Boat-tailed adds an exuberant

wing flutter that can carry them almost vertically over his back. During the Boat-tailed's wing flutter he emits a peculiar rattle that has been attributed to mechanical wing movements. Selander and other observers are now convinced that this sound is generated vocally.

A second display common to males of both species is known as 'head-up' or 'bill-tilting'. This antic is done all year, but most intently as a threat during breeding season. This display consists of standing sleek and tall with the tip of the closed beak as high in the air as possible. For a real threat, particularly among Great-taileds, the head may arch over the back.

NESTING

Territorial defense is about the only male contribution to nesting. While males display threats to each other and 'ruff-outs' to passing females, females build their nests and rear the young. Both species are community nesters. Ten or more females will build in a clump of bushes while a dominant male stands guard.

Selander observed that males are no more particular about their choice of mates than the food they eat! He reports that where both species occur, males make "advances" to females of either species. It is the females' discrimination that prevents interbreeding.

SUMMARY

The Boat-tailed and Great-tailed Grackles, now distinct species, are now sympatric in an area bordering the Gulf of Mexico in Louisiana and Texas. Field identification of the two species is discussed, including choice of habitat, appearance, voice and display, as well as the possible effects of competition between the grackles and other species.