

SIGHTING OF BOAT-TAILED GRACKLE
(*Quiscalus major*) IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Richard Forster, Massachusetts Audubon Society

Date: April 24, 1986 (10:35 A.M.)
Location: Newbury (Plumbush), Essex County, Massachusetts
Observers: Richard A. Forster and Carol E. Seeckts
Weather: Overcast, light NE winds, temperature about 50°F;
showers threatened but no rain until afternoon.
Optics: 10 x 40 Zeiss (RAF); 8 x 40 Leitz (CES)

It was a cloudy, cool but not raw, typical mid-April day. Although rain threatened at any time, fortunately it held off until the afternoon. There was a full moon on April 24 with high tide at 11 A.M. Consequently, the marsh appeared more like a mini-ocean than the typical grassland interspersed with tidal creeks. It was an excellent tide for seeking shorebirds which would concentrate in isolated pools in the marsh. At the time, I was methodically checking all such likely pools along the road leading from Newburyport to Plum Island.

We pulled out of the area known as Plumbush and had proceeded east toward Plum Island only a short distance before I stopped along the roadside to look at a pool behind the houses on the opposite side of the road. Immediately after stepping out of the car, I spotted two large blackbirds (grackles) along the edge of the pool. Their blackish wings, back, and tail and bright buffy head, breast, and remaining underparts immediately indicated they were Boat-tailed Grackles. They were viewed only briefly (two or three seconds) on the ground before they took flight in an easterly direction paralleling the road and passing the observers at a distance of about 60 feet. They next perched in a small tree near the top of the bridge leading to Plum Island.


Since the two grackles were now perched "back to" and at some distance, we opted to drive in the car to reach them as quickly as possible. We approached the perched birds, and as we drew abreast of them, they flew. We then raced to the bottom of the bridge where a safe pull-off was available. We watched them as they approached and flew by, again in an easterly direction, at a distance of 50-60 feet, and the intense buffy coloration of the head and underparts was equally obvious. As they flew away, they gradually gained height (about 100 feet) and continued heading toward the east until they approached Plum Island when the birds turned and continued in a northerly direction. After a short period, they dropped as if putting down in the vicinity of "the basin" (the church was visible in their line of descent). We proceeded to the basin, but it was wall-to-wall water, and no grackles were in sight.

As is obvious from the preceding account, the views were less than satisfactory, but certain points were noted. The wings,

back, and tail were distinctly *blackish*, with no evidence of gloss. Although the head was buff in coloration, it was clearly muted on the crown and ear coverts, thereby accentuating the prominent buff supercilium. The underparts were bright buff (brightest on the chest) with a pale throat. The intensity of color faded toward the belly. The bill was dark, but the eye color was not discerned. No vocalizations were heard.

The identity of the two female Boat-tailed Grackles is presumptive based on circumstances and logic. Distinguishing between extralimital Boat-tailed and Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) is extremely difficult even under the most ideal field conditions. Facts which suggest Boat-tailed Grackle are these: 1) it was spring; 2) the birds were in a salt marsh; and 3) the species was recorded for the first time in both Connecticut and Rhode Island the fall of 1985. It has been the writer's opinion that the first Boat-tails in Massachusetts would occur in spring as overshoots from the breeding area as nearby as Long Island, New York, whereas an extralimital Great-tail would most likely be a fall immature and appear in an agricultural area or open field situation.

The author has had extensive field experience with both species including brown-eyed male Boat-tails in coastal Texas. His most recent encounter occurred in February 1985 when literally tens of thousands were observed at Miami airport, flying to roost in *Casuarina* trees.



DVOC
PELAGIC TRIP
Sept. 27th, 1986
Barnegat Light, N.J.
leave 2:00 AM
return 6:30 PM
make \$40.00 check payable to:
DVOC
Send to: Alan Brady
P.O. Box 103
Wycombe, PA. 18980
(215) 598-7856
Will send details