

EXTRALIMITAL OCCURRENCES OF PALE-EYED BOAT-TAILED GRACKLES (*Quiscalus major*) IN CENTRAL FLORIDA

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Three subspecies of the Boat-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus major*) are permanent, breeding residents in Florida: *Q. m. westoni* over most of the mainland; *Q. m. torreyi* along the northern Atlantic coast south to St. Augustine and Butler Beach, St. Johns County; and *Q. m. alabamensis* along the western Panhandle Gulf Coast east to Pace, Santa Rosa County, with one non-breeding record east to Panama City, Bay County (Stevenson and Anderson 1994, Cobb 2012, Post et al. 2014, Dailey and Dailey 2016, Pranty and Ponzio 2016). All sub-adult Boat-tailed Grackles, and all ages of *Q. m. westoni*, have brown irides, whereas the irides of adult *torreyi* and *alabamensis* are white or yellow (Post et al. 2014).

Stevenson and Anderson (1994:674–675) state that *torreyi* “. . . has occasionally been recorded south of the St. Johns River in winter” and that *torreyi* “. . . migrates somewhat farther south” of Duval County during fall. It is unclear whether these grackles reached central Florida as defined by Stevenson and Anderson (1994) and Greenlaw et al. (2014). We are aware of only two previous reports of pale-eyed Boat-tailed Grackles occurring in the central peninsula: one *torreyi* collected by William Brewster at Mellonville (a town later absorbed by Sanford), Seminole County, on 16 March 1877 (Museum of Comparative Zoology #201169; Stevenson and Anderson 1994); and one male *torreyi* banded at Magnolia Gardens, Charleston County, South Carolina, on 21 May 1986 that was recaptured “exhausted” at Daytona Beach, Volusia County, Florida, on 7 November 1987. This grackle was rehabilitated and released locally two days later after having traveled about 413 km from its banding site (Post 1994, Post et al. 2014). In this note, we report on photographic records of pale-eyed Boat-tailed Grackles in Volusia and Hernando counties, along central Florida’s Atlantic and Gulf coasts, respectively.

Volusia County.—MB has discovered and photographed four separate pale-eyed Boat-tailed Grackles in Volusia County. On 23 January 2013 (Fig. 1) and 7 December 2013, MB found single males along the coast at Ponce de Leon Inlet. On 8 November 2014, MB found a single female at a dairy near Deleon Springs, a record that is especially significant because the location is about 40 km inland from the Atlantic Ocean. Finally, MB found a female at Shiloh Marsh, Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, on 26 March 2019; this establishes the southernmost record of a pale-eyed Boat-tailed Grackle along the Atlantic coast.

Hernando County.—BP discovered and photographed a pale-eyed female Boat-tailed Grackle among a flock of *westoni* grackles at Bayport Park, Bayport, on 9 December 2013 (Pranty and Dupuis 2013). This flock also traveled to Jenkins Creek Park and Linda Pedersen Park, two small, adjacent parks about 2.0 km to the southeast (e.g., Pranty and Gomez 2014). BP also found the pale-eyed Boat-tailed Grackle 3.75 km north of



Figure 1. Male Boat-tailed Grackle, presumably of the subspecies *torreyi*, at Ponce de Leon Inlet, Volusia County, Florida, on 23 January 2013. Photograph by Michael Brothers.

Bayport Park at Alfred A. McKethan Pine Island Park (e.g., Pranty and Fraser 2018). The lack of obvious size differences between this female and numerous female *westoni* Boat-tailed Grackles observed in direct comparison (BP and Tony Leukering pers. obs.) helped rule out the possibility that the Hernando County grackle was a Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*), a species not yet recorded in Florida, but one that seems likely to stray to the state eventually.

Remarkably, what must have been the same pale-eyed female Boat-tailed Grackle returned to the Bayport area for the next three successive winter seasons. Although BP conducted only a few cursory searches for the grackle between April and October of each year, we considered it unlikely that it remained in the region year-round—but see the postscript. The range of dates of occurrence during the grackle's five winters in Hernando County, based on the few reports submitted to eBird by BP and other trustworthy observers, were 9 December 2013–30 January 2014, 16 November 2014, 4–27 December 2015 (Fig. 2), 9 November 2016–26 February 2017, and 5 November–19 December 2019. The Bayport area records appear to represent the first occurrences of a pale-eyed Boat-tailed Grackle along Florida's peninsular Gulf Coast.

Because *alabamensis* and *torreyi* Boat-tailed Grackles cannot be distinguished from one another except possibly from in-hand measurements (Post et al. 2014), we must presume which subspecies are represented in our photographs. The Volusia County records almost certainly represent *torreyi*, which breeds regularly within 100 km of the county (*alabamensis* is at least 575 km distant). The Hernando County records are problematic. The range of *alabamensis* is roughly 560 km northwest of the Bayport



Figure 2. Female Boat-tailed Grackle, of either the *torreyi* or *alabamensis* subspecies, at Bayport Park, Bayport, Hernando County, Florida, on 4 December 2015. Photograph by Bill Pranty.

area (presuming no trans-Gulf flight). The range of *torreyi* is much closer (roughly 230 km), but a crossing of the peninsula would be required to reach Hernando County. In addition to the two records listed above of pale-eyed Boat-tailed Grackles inland in the peninsula, we can add a third. Sam Ewing (2013) photographed a pale-eyed male Boat-tailed Grackle along the St. Johns River at James C. Godwin Riverfront Park, Palatka, Putnam County, Florida, on 10 April 2013. This grackle was about 40 km inland from the Atlantic Ocean. These three records, including one known to represent *torreyi*, suggest that a crossing of the Florida peninsula by *torreyi*, although unproven, seems possible.

The abundance and ordinariness of Boat-tailed Grackles in Florida, coupled with an overall disinterest in subspecies by most birders, undoubtedly cause few observers to closely examine Boat-tailed Grackles. As such, extralimital pale-eyed individuals may be more frequent than is known currently. We encourage birders to examine Boat-tailed Grackle flocks along the eastern Panhandle and in the peninsula and to report any pale-eyed individuals to eBird and ornithological groups.

Postscripts.— On the Aripeka–Bayport Christmas Bird Count held on 19 December 2018, BP, Don Fraser, and David Bowman found two pale-eyed female Boat-tailed Grackles among *westoni* grackles at Alfred A. McKethan Pine Island Park, Hernando County (Pranty and Fraser 2018). This second pale-eyed grackle (Fig. 3) suggests that perhaps the original pale-eyed female is now resident in Hernando County and has bred successfully at least once with a male *westoni* Boat-tailed Grackle. Also, on 29 October 2019, Steve Spenceley (2019) photographed a pale-eyed female Boat-tailed Grackle at Alfred A. McKethan Pine Island Park, proving that she remains in the area.

MB and John Murphy discovered a pale-eyed male Boat-tailed Grackle, probably *alabamensis*, at Apalachicola, Franklin County, on 15 December 2018. This record appears to establish the first record of a pale-eyed Boat-tailed Grackle from the eastern Panhandle.



Figure 3. Female-plumaged Boat-tailed Grackle at Alfred A. McKethan Pine Island Park, Hernando County, Florida, on 19 December 2019. This individual, with less-conspicuous pale irides compared to the female in Figure 2, may represent an intergrade between the female in Figure 2 and a male *westoni* Boat-tailed Grackle. Photograph by Bill Pranty.

Finally, along the Atlantic coast, MB has seen small groups of pale-eyed Boat-tailed Grackles at Vilano Beach, St. Johns County, and small numbers of pale-eyed grackles at Flagler Beach recently. These sightings suggest a southern expansion of *torreyi* in Florida.

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