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STATUS OF THE BOAT-TAILED GRACKLE IN THE FLORIDA PANHANDLE

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The Boat-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus major*) has long been known as a common permanent resident nesting over much of Florida, but published references are generally vague or imprecise regarding its occurrence on the Keys and in extreme northern Florida, especially northwestward. Howell (1932) considered the species to be "less numerous in northwestern Florida and there restricted to the coast region" and found on "most of the Keys as far south as Key West," and he made no specific reference to the occurrence of Boat-tailed Grackles in the northernmost parts of the Florida Peninsula. No change of range was indicated by Sprunt (1954), but the AOU Check-list (1957) implied that the northwestern limit of this grackle in Florida was in Bay County. Recently (Stevenson 1978) I pointed out that the occurrence of *Q. major* on the Keys had never been demonstrated and could be no more than casual; cited extensions of its breeding range in the extreme northern Peninsula; and cited a few records from the northwestern portion of the state. Menk (1981) details the increase of the species in Leon County, Florida, within the last few years. My purpose here is to clarify the status of the Boat-tailed Grackle in that portion of Florida lying west of the Apalachicola River, which I refer to as the Panhandle.

The only resident, breeding populations of Boat-tailed Grackles known to me in the Florida Panhandle occur just west of the Apalachicola River. One is on St. Vincent Island (Franklin Co.) and probably just across the narrow span of water at its western end known as Indian Pass (Gulf Co.) and the other is around the town of Apalachicola (Franklin Co.). Over the years two other breeding sites have been reported. Weston (1965:122), on an unspecified date prior to 1930, reported a "flight line (back and forth) of a few birds

carrying food to an inaccessible spot far out in the marsh" of upper Escambia Bay, and Roy Hallman (journal) saw "several adults feeding young" at Botheration Bayou (near Panama City, Bay Co.) on 22 June 1940. Thus there has been no report of the species' breeding in the Panhandle within the last 40 years except very near the mouth of the Apalachicola River, although Hallman (journal) cited a record of "several" in summer near Panama City as recently as 28 August 1955.

Other records (most unpublished) near Pensacola (Weston, journal) and Panama City (Hallman, journal) have been intermittent and usually involved small numbers. Weston mentioned at least 11 specific records (1926-61) totaling about 70-75 individuals. Hallman listed eight dates of occurrence (1937-57), the numbers small except for estimates of 150 on two winter dates—9 February 1941 and 14 November 1941. The species has also been reported occasionally in other parts of the Panhandle. Worthington and Todd (1926) encountered a flock of "about twenty birds, mostly females," from which they collected two *males*, on the south side of Choctawhatchee Bay (Walton Co.) on 4 May 1903. Harold and Agnes Gaither saw two females at Destin (Okaloosa Co.) on 4 October 1969 (Purrington 1970), and Stephen and Barbara Stedman saw six females in "Escambia Marsh" (= upper Escambia Bay?), 6 March 1977 (Imhof 1977). S. Stedman (pers. comm.) also had the following records near Panama City: 3 on 27 May 1974, 2 the next day, and one on 31 July 1975. My records in the Panhandle consist of several birds of each sex on Hurricane Island (Bay Co.) on 23 September 1932; four or five females in upper Escambia Bay (Santa Rosa Co.) on 22 March 1975; a female at the Choctawhatchee Bay bridge, U. S. 331, on 12 May 1956, and a male there on 26 March 1980.

The Boat-tailed Grackle is migratory to some extent, as most of the records in the Panhandle, and the only large flocks there, have occurred outside the breeding season. The extent of this migration along the Gulf coast appears to be greater than had been previously realized. All records in the Panhandle to date have been near tidewater.

My recognition (Stevenson 1978) of three subspecies of these grackles along the Gulf coast led me to wonder what subspecies might occur in the Florida Panhandle. The best way to determine this is to examine collected specimens, especially if iris color is noted on the label. Adjacent subspecies can even be distinguished in the

field when the iris color is clearly seen, with light-eyed birds presumably from the coast of Alabama or southeastern Mississippi (*Q. m. alabamensis*), and dark-eyed birds from either the Florida Peninsula west to about Apalachicola (*Q. m. westoni*) or southwestern Mississippi, Louisiana, or the upper Texas coast (*Q. m. major*). Unfortunately, no record was made of iris color for the two specimens from Choctawhatchee Bay in 1903. Hallman's notes indicated that he collected three specimens from the large flock he encountered in February 1941, but I have been unable to locate these specimens. Some of his other specimens were destroyed by insects, and the same fate may have befallen these grackles. Furthermore, Hallman's comments regarding iris color are ambiguous. In three instances he wrote (journal) "male(s) with light eyes," but there is no population of this bird known to me in which the iris color appears light in one sex and dark in the other. In upper Escambia Bay, I was unable to determine the iris color of the females I saw (March 1975) due to light fog, and I did not record the eye color of the female seen at Choctawhatchee Bay (1956). Apparently no specimen has been taken in the Pensacola area, thus the only recent specimen available is an adult male I collected at Choctawhatchee Bay, 26 March 1980 (TTRS 3365). Its completely dark gray irides ruled out the possibility that it represented *Q. m. alabamensis* and probably *Q. m. major* as well. In all specimens of the latter race I have handled, a narrow periphery of light color surrounds the darker part of the iris, a feature that can sometimes be seen in the field. The specimen from Choctawhatchee Bay had the following measurements (mm): bill length from nostril 29.6, bill depth at nostril 12.0, wing length 168, tail length 152; it weighed 183 g. The tail was shorter than any of the 55 adult males of *Q. m. major* I had previously examined, but other measurements approximated those for both *major* and *alabamensis*. Weights were excluded from my paper (1978) because too few were then available for *torreyi*, but the specimen under discussion was lighter than any of the 12 adult males of *alabamensis* I handled. Thus, on the bases of iris color, measurements, weight, and geographic proximity, I consider this specimen an example of *Q. m. westoni*.

The identity of the Boat-tailed Grackles in the Pensacola area was not settled until I learned the whereabouts of Francis Weston's journal. When I received a copy of the Boat-tailed Grackle account from the Museum of Zoology, Louisiana State University, I learned

that Alexander Sprunt, Jr., had requested Weston to keep notes on the iris color of Boat-tails on the Alabama coast and that Weston also kept notes of those seen around Pensacola. In both areas all birds seen during April and May 1984 had "yellow" irides, although Weston did not mention eye color in his account of five subsequent records. In view of the extremely unlikely event that *Q. m. torreyi* would wander there from the Atlantic coast, it may be assumed that *alabamensis* is the bird found there in winter and is probably the form that once nested in upper Escambia Bay. Naturalists in northwestern Florida should continue to keep careful records on eye-color of any Boat-tailed Grackles they see.

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