

## Status and Occurrence of Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin. Submitted: April 15, 2017.

### Introduction and Distribution

The Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) is a very large blackbird that has been rapidly expanding its breeding range in North America since the early 1900's, when it was restricted to southern Texas (Johnson and Peer 2001). Since that time the Great-tailed Grackle's breeding range has exploded northward to be found as a year round resident from southern California, east through southern Nevada, south-western Utah, across Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma, north into eastern Kansas, south eastern Nebraska, western Missouri, south into western Arkansas and Louisiana (Johnson and Peer 2001). The Great-tailed Grackle is found as a breeding species north of the permanent range in parts of Northern California, eastern Oregon, northern Nevada, Utah, Colorado, western Kansas, north into Nebraska, with its population extending north into Iowa (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

The Great-tailed Grackle was considered conspecific with the Boat-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus major*) until it was officially split into 2 species by the American Ornithological Union in 1973 (Eisenmann *et al.* 1973). While the Boat-tailed Grackle breeds in open marsh in coastal areas, the Great-tailed Grackle prefers drier coastal habitats and is typically found in areas with scattered trees near standing water (Johnson and Peer 2001). It nests high in large trees, as well as in marsh vegetation. Inland, the Great-tailed Grackle is more frequently found in prairies, agricultural areas, and towns, while the Boat-tailed Grackle is more likely to nest in marshy areas (Johnson and Peer 2001). The Common Grackle (*Quiscalus quiscula*) occurs in many of the same habitats as the Great-tailed Grackle, including marshes and cities, but uses open woodland and forest edge more readily (Johnson and Peer 2001).

The Great-tailed Grackle forages in open, grassy areas such as grasslands, pastures, and lawns. It is well adapted to lawns, trees, and dumpsters in cities (Sibley 2000, Johnson and Peer 2001). Its diet is varied and includes arthropods, small vertebrates, plant matter, and garbage (Johnson and Peer 2001). Although there is considerable overlap in the distribution of the 3 species, the Common Grackle occurs throughout the eastern United States and Canada, the Great-tailed Grackle is found in the Midwest and western United States, and the Boat-tailed Grackle is confined to Florida and coastal areas of the Gulf States and the eastern United States (Johnson and Peer 2001, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Like the Great-tailed Grackle, the Common Grackle expanded its range to the west during the twentieth century (Johnson and Peer 2001).

The Great-tailed Grackle is a permanent resident south of North America, and is found throughout Mexico, south through Central America, and even into South America (Ridgely and

Gwynne 1989, Stiles and Skutch 1989, Howell and Web 2010). There are eight recognized subspecies, with 3 found in North America (Johnson and Peer 2001).

As the Great-tailed Grackle continues to expand northward records are likely to increase in regions well north of the species' current breeding range (Sibley 2000, Johnson and Peer 2001). The Great-tailed Grackle has been found as a vagrant along most of the Eastern United States and in many states north of its normal range in the Great Plains (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). In Canada, the Great-tailed Grackle has been found as an accidental vagrant with 1 record for Nova Scotia (Johnson and Peer 2001, McLaren 2012), at least 3 records for Ontario (Weir 1988, Weir 1989, Currie 2004), 1 record for Manitoba (Swick 2013) and 2 records for Alberta (Johnson and Peer 2001).

In the Pacific Northwest, the Great-tailed Grackle is an accidental vagrant with 10 accepted records for Washington State by the Washington Bird Records Committee (WBRC 2016). In British Columbia, the Great-tailed Grackle is also classified as an accidental vagrant with 5 provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014). There are no records for Alaska (Gibson *et al.* 2013), however there is a record of unknown origin for Hawaii (Ralph and Pyle 1982).

### **Identification and Similar Species**

The identification of the Great-tailed Grackle in British Columbia is fairly straight forward as there is no other blackbird species that is as robust as this species. The adult male Great-tailed Grackle measures 46cm in length, with a wingspan of 58.42 cm, and weighs 190 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The adult female Great-tailed Grackles measures 38 cm, with a wingspan of 48.26 cm, and weighs 105 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). Overall this species is large, long and lanky in size (Jaramillo and Burke 1999). The males have an exceptionally long, graduated, keel-shaped tail (Jaramillo and Burke 1999). The adult male is iridescent black with a purplish-blue sheen on head, back, and under-parts (Johnson and Peer 2001). The eyes are yellow (Johnson and Peer 2001). The adult female is much smaller, overall dusky brown, with darker wings and tail (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The iridescence is confined to the brown upper-parts (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The eye is yellow, but paler than found in male birds (Johnson and Peer 2001). There is a distinct buffy supercilium and throat, somewhat similar to that of a female winter plumaged Rusty Blackbird (*Euphagus carolinus*) (Johnson and Peer 2001, Sibley 2000). The remaining under-parts are cinnamon buff to buffy brown on breast to grayish brown on belly (Johnson and Peer 2001). The tail is keeled only slightly or not at all (Johnson and Peer 2001). The juvenile is brown like female birds, but less glossy, with streaked under-parts and a dark iris (Johnson and Peer 2001). The juvenile male resembles the adult by mid-fall, but has flat, not keeled, tail (Johnson and Peer 2001). Similar species such as the Common Grackle are much smaller overall in size (Sibley

2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). It is important to note that in Common Grackle, there is no major difference in size between males and females (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The Common Grackle measures 32 cm in length, with a wingspan of 43.18 cm, and weighs 115 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The female Great-tailed Grackle is overall smaller than the male and can approach Common Grackles in size (Johnson and Peer 2001). Special attention to plumage markings and calls should be given to keen observers. The Great-tailed Grackle is much larger than the Brewer's Blackbird (*Euphagus cyanocephalus*) which measures 23 cm in length, with a wingspan of 39.37 cm, and weighs 63 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). All ages of the Great-tailed Grackle are much larger than the Rusty Blackbird which measures 23 cm in length, with a wingspan of 35.56 cm, and weighs 60 grams (Sibley 2000, Dunn and Alderfer 2011).

Blake (1968b) recognizes 8 subspecies throughout the Great-tailed Grackle's range (Johnson and Peer 2001). The following descriptions and ranges are taken from Rea 1969b, Jaramillo and Burke 1999, and Johnson and Peer 2001. In North America, there are three subspecies (*Quiscalus mexicanus nelsoni*), (*Quiscalus mexicanus monsoni*), and (*Quiscalus mexicanus prosopidicola*) (Blake 1968b). The geographic ranges of all these subspecies continue to expand northward throughout North America (Johnson and Peer 2001). The scope of this species account will be to focus on the identification and range of the three subspecies of Great-tailed Grackle that are found in North America and comes from Johnson and Peer (2001).

The first North American subspecies of Great-tailed Grackle is (*Quiscalus mexicanus nelsoni*) (Ridgway 1902). This subspecies breeds from northern Baja California, central California, northern Nevada, and Arizona to southern Sonora, Mexico. This is the smallest and palest of the races. The male is smaller and with shorter tail than (*Q. m. mexicanus*) and (*Q. m. prosopidicola*). The female is paler, with a pale grayish-buff throat, under-parts, and supercilium. The Iris is straw white. Of note, currently in southern California and in southwestern Arizona, many females have plumage characteristics resembling (*Q. m. monsoni*), but measurements are closer to (*Q. m. nelsoni*), suggesting genetic swamping by (*Q. m. monsoni*).

The second North American subspecies of Great-tailed Grackle is (*Quiscalus mexicanus monsoni*) (Phillips 1950a). This subspecies breeds from south-eastern California, central Arizona, southern Utah, and southern Colorado to West Texas south to Zacatecas, Mexico; and probably also now in north-eastern Baja California and north-western Sonora, in Mexico. This subspecies is very large, but smaller than (*Q. m. mexicanus*), with intermediate bill depth. The male has a more noticeable purplish gloss on the back and belly than in other races. The female is dark-backed like (*Q. m. mexicanus*), with a reddish tone; a dark brownish-gray breast, in

contrast to the buff-brown vent and darker throat found on (*Q. m. prosopidicola*) females. The iris is straw white.

The third North American subspecies of Great-tailed Grackle is (*Quiscalus mexicanus prosopidicola*) (Lowery 1938a). This subspecies breeds from southern Nebraska to south-central Texas and south-western Louisiana south to southern Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas, Mexico. There are numerous records to the north and in the east in the United States. The male is similar in colouration to and slightly smaller than the neighbouring subspecies (*Q. m. mexicanus*). The female has light brownish-olive to buffy under-parts and a paler head than the subspecies (*Q. m. mexicanus*). The iris is yellowish cream.

### **Occurrence and Documentation**

The Great-tailed Grackle is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with only 5 provincial records (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The first record for British Columbia was of an adult female found and photographed by Jack Bowling at the southern tip of Haida Gwaii, at Cape St. James from May 6-9, 1979 (Campbell *et al.* 2001). This is the furthest northern record in North America to date, but given the current expansion northward of the Great-tailed Grackle's breeding range, there will likely be more records in the future. The second record for British Columbia was an adult female found and photographed by Chris Siddle in Vernon from December 4, 1993 - April 11, 1994 (Gehlen 1994). Originally identified as an "odd-looking Common Grackle", the bird was later verified as a female Great-tailed Grackle (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.). This observation shows that careful scrutiny should be given to female Grackle reports due to the smaller size of female Great-tailed Grackles, which although are larger than Common Grackles, can approach them in overall size (Johnson and Peer 2001). The third record for British Columbia was found by Wayne and Brent Diakow in Kelowna where it remained for three years from June 2, 2000 - June 2, 2003 (Charlesworth 2001, Cecile 2003d). This bird was either on its own or found trying to court female Brewer's Blackbirds (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.). Although no hybrid offspring were ever reported, hybrid Great-tailed Grackle X Brewer's Blackbird has been found in California (Johnson and Peer 2001). This individual was found hanging out in shopping malls, a pitch and putt golf course, and around urban Kelowna (Charlesworth 2001, Cecile 2003d). It was also the first Great-tailed Grackle to be documented on a Canadian Christmas Bird Count, it was found by Don Cecile on the Kelowna Count of December 15, 2001 (D. Cecile Pers. Comm.). The fourth record was an adult male found by Rick Toochin in Sooke on August 8, 2007 (Toochin *et al.* 2014). The bird was observed flying over town heading towards a nearby golf course (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.). Subsequent searches by a few observers unfortunately turned up remains at the golf course (R. Toochin Pers. Comm.). It was later found out that staff working at the restaurant of the golf course had seen the bird a couple of days later and wondered what it was due to its obvious size and had seen it killed by a medium-sized hawk, likely a Cooper's

Hawk (D. Gubersky Pers. Comm.). The fifth record for British Columbia was found reported to Chris Charlesworth on June 24, 2010 in Kelowna (Toochin *et al.* 2014).

In Washington State, the vagrancy pattern is similar to British Columbia with 8 of the 10 state records involving birds turning up in Spring and Summer, with 1 record and 1 late winter-early Spring record (Wahl *et al.* 2005, WBRC 2016). These records would point to vagrants that are found in our region that are likely Spring overshoots or birds wandering north looking for new breeding territories. The Great-tailed Grackle should be watched for in both mixed blackbird flocks and as single individuals. Observers should watch for this species anywhere Brewer's Blackbirds occur since they often hang out with this species as vagrants. The Great-tailed Grackle is a species that can turn up anywhere in British Columbia, particularly in agricultural areas, parklands, cities, and near landfill sites. Over time a clearer pattern of vagrancy will likely emerge as the Great-tailed Grackle is very likely to re-occur in British Columbia in the near future as this species continues to push well north of its current breeding range.



Figure 1: Record #3: Great-tailed Grackle adult male found in Kelowna, photo taken on February 3, 2001. Photo © Don Cecile.



Figure 2: Record #3: Great-tailed Grackle adult male found in Kelowna, photo taken on February 3, 2001. Photo © Don Cecile.

**Table 1: Records of Great-tailed Grackle for British Columbia:**

- 1.(1) adult female May 6-9, 1979: Jack Bowling (BC Photo 630) Cape St. James, southern tip of Haida Gwaii (Campbell *et al.* 2001)
- 2.(1) adult female December 4, 1993- April 11, 1994: Chris Siddle, mobs (photo) Vernon (Gehlen 1994, Davidson 1994, Bowling 1994a)
- 3.(1) adult male June 2, 2000- June 2, 2003: Wayne & Brent Diakow, mobs (photo) Kelowna (Charlesworth 2001, Cecile 2003d, Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 4.(1) adult male August 8, 2007: Rick Toochin (specimen: remains) Sooke (Toochin *et al.* 2014)
- 5.(1) adult male June 24, 2010: *fide* Chris Charlesworth, mobs: Kelowna (Toochin *et al.* 2014)

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