

Great-tailed Grackle

1 Jul 1983

Riverton Area, Fremont Co., IA

*Silcock, *Moore, *Wilson, *Petersen,

*Newlon; IBL 53:76,103; 54:39, Silcock 1983

Record Number: 83-36

Classification: A-P

DOCUMENTATIONS

W. Ross Silcock (July 1)

Francis L. Moore (July 2)

Barbara L. Wilson (July 3)

Peter C. Petersen (July 9)

M. Newlon (August 13)

PHOTOGRAPHS

Francis L. Moore (July 2; P-0103)

Peter C. Petersen (July 9; P-0102)

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 53:76, 103

Silcock, W. R. 1983. Great-tailed Grackle in southwest Iowa:
continuation of an explosive range expansion. IBL 53:106-107.

Records Committee: IBL 54:39

VOTE: 3-I-P, 2-I, 1-II, 1-abstain

REVOTE (with photos, at meeting, October 1983): I-P

Silcock, W. R. 1983. Great-tailed Grackle in southwest Iowa: continuation of an explosive range expansion. *Iowa Bird Life* 53:106-107.

Great-tailed Grackle in Southwest Iowa: Continuation of an Explosive Range Expansion — In 1983 the Great-tailed Grackle reached Iowa, with two records for the species being accepted by the Records Committee of the Iowa Ornithologists' Union. Iowa's first accepted record was of a pair seen along I-29 in Mills County near Folsom Lake on May 19 (*Iowa Bird Life* 53:76). The second record involved two males and a female found at Riverton Game Management Area in Fremont County July 9. The behaviour of these birds strongly suggested nesting, and on July 15 the female was seen carrying food to at least one young bird. Early in August the female was found feeding just one young bird, the latter apparently a male, as it was in the process of molting, with glossy black feathering appearing most noticeably in the mantle area. This series of observations at Riverton thus represents the first breeding of this species in Iowa.

While identification of the Riverton birds is virtually certain based on geographic considerations alone (see below), confirmation of identity as Great-tailed Grackles rather than Boat-tailed Grackles is based on two main points: the flat crowns of the three adult birds formed an almost straight line with their culmens, a considerably different appearance to that seen in Boat-tails, which have an abruptly-rising "forehead", and the female bird had an orangy-colored iris, whereas female Boat-tails have dark eyes.

The occurrence of this species in Iowa represents a further step in the continuing expansion of this species from its "base" in southern parts of the southwestern United States. Pruitt (1975: *American Birds* 29:985), outlined the northward spread of the Great-tailed Grackle into Oklahoma in the 1950s and into Kansas by 1964. Johnsgard (1979: *Birds of the Great Plains*) stated that by 1970 the species had spread into central Kansas, and that in 1977 it bred in Douglas and Adams Counties in Nebraska, adding that these records suggested that "the rapid northern expansion of its range has not terminated." Nebraska's first record was in Phelps County in 1976 (*Nebraska Bird Review* 47:59), and it has been recorded there every year since, and assumed to be breeding (NBR 47:59; AB 33:877). Interestingly, this species appeared in northwest Missouri at about the same time, with what was stated to be the first Missouri record in Holt County May 8, 1976 (AB 30:850). Breeding did not occur in Missouri until 1979 however, when no fewer than 10 nests were found at Big Lake State Park in Holt County in 1979 (AB 33:778). Birds from this colony apparently attempted to overwinter, as the species was reported at the Squaw Creek NWR CBC in 1979 (AB 34:279). To date, there are no winter records for Nebraska. Since these initial observations in Nebraska and Missouri, the species has been found each year, usually in the same locations, but with a few notable exceptions: nesting occurred in Lancaster County in 1981 in an area where the birds had been seen the previous year (NBR 48:77; 49:52), and a male was seen in Wayne County April 14-17, 1979, to date the furthest north record for Nebraska (NBR 47:60). The largest nesting colony in the area seems to be the one at Big Lake State Park in Holt County, Missouri, where a peak of 17 birds were found March 27, 1982 (*Bluebird* 49 (3):22).

From the above records, it seems that the expansion of this species has veered somewhat to the northeast, with south central Nebraska being colonized first, then a stronghold being established in northwest Missouri. To date there are no records from western Nebraska nor from Missouri south of St. Joseph (AB 37:308), suggesting that spring movement northward takes place from established wintering areas near the northward extent of the breeding range. It seems likely that the birds reaching Iowa in 1983 were derived from the population in northwest Missouri, as no wintering areas seem to be established as yet in Nebraska. While a few birds do indeed attempt to overwinter in northwest Missouri (AB 34:279; AB 36:30), the majority appear in late February and remain during the summer (AB 37:308).

Thus it seems that this species may establish itself at least in southwest Iowa and become a regular part of the avifauna of our state. W. ROSS SILCOCK, Box 300, Tabor, IA. 51653.

On July 1 Frances Moore and I discovered two adult males and an adult female of this species at Riverton GMA. The birds were seen in a hedgerow at the east entrance to the area. The two males were perched on top of the bushes, with quite a racket going on, until a female popped up and all three birds flew to the top of some medium sized trees, where they were photographed by Frances.

The birds were conclusively identified as Great-tailed Grackles by:

1. Males had very long tails, at least as long as the body. Culmen of the heavy bill and the crown of the head virtually formed a straight line ie there was no abrupt rising forehead as would be the case in Boat-tailed Grackle. Eye (iris) was white, very strongly contrasting with the black facial feathering. While the Atlantic coast Boat-tailed Grackles have pale eyes, this feature, along with the others noted, identify these birds as Great-tailed.
2. Female was dark brown above, including the cap, and olive or a little darker than olive-brown underneath. She had the same flattened head appearance as the males. Her iris was pale also, but yellower, rather than white, and did not contrast as strongly with the brownish facial feathering.

It was suspected they might be nesting, but no evidence was obtained.

On July 6 they were again seen ^{I was} with Eugene and Eloise Armstrong. The female was very busy carrying food to what was apparently a nest site in the hedgerow where they were first seen July 1 (above). The males were not seen until flushed from the hedgerow, apparently taking no part in caring for the young.

On July 15 with Bob Myers the young had apparently fledged, as the female was now carrying food (just as busily as before) to a ~~sight~~^{site} in tall weeds some 500 yards from the nest site. We attempted to flush the young to see how many there were, but the tall weeds (over 6 feet) limited visibility. I saw one brownish bird fly out, and another blackish bird. The latter may well have been one of the males, but I believe at least one young was fledged.

During most ~~sightings~~^{sightings}, chucking sounds typical of grackles were heard, but on the initial sighting, squealing sounds apparently characteristic of this species were heard.

Ross Silcock
July 31.

Ross Silcock

(notes typed from field notes
taken at observation sites)

What species? Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) How many? 3 (2 ♂, 1 ♀)

Location? Approx. 1/8 mi North of Rangers house at Riverton W.M.A., Fremont Co., Iowa

Type of habitat? Open grassland near old building foundation along 15' high hedge

When? date(s): July 2, 1983 time: 8:15 to 8:30

Who? your name and address: Francis L. Moore, 336 Fairfield St., Waterloo, IA 50703

others with you: Ross Silcock, Malvern, IA

others before or after you: Bob Myers, 2 weeks later, he saw 2 juveniles being fed by ♀.

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior. Ross Silcock and I spotted the two male Great-tailed Grackles at the same time, just after I had turned North from the Rangers station (house) to go around Riverton W.M.A. on the East and North sides. They flew out of a high (15 to 20 foot) hedge to the East (Right) side of the access road before we got to the road that leads to an overlook on the East side of Riverton W.M.A. As we approached the hedge on foot the males flew out of the hedge and flew around the hedge several times landing at times in the hedge and in a small dead tree approx. 100' from us. As they made one of their passes over the hedge a female Great-tailed flew out and landed in the small dead tree with the two males. The males were black over all their bodies with a bluish iridescence on the back and head. The males had very long V-shaped tails. The female was a pale to medium brown bird (much browner than a female Common Grackle is). The feet, legs and bill were dark. There was a large contrast between the size of the male and female Great-tailed Grackles. Only three birds were noted during the time we observed them but did not want to disturb them too much so that others might have a chance to see them. The calls that the birds were making was quite different from Common Grackles there. They had several squeaks and almost grunt-like calls as we watched on a number of different pitches, very different from a Common Grackle.

Similar species and how eliminated: One Common Grackle that was flying with the two males was quite a bit smaller compared to the two Great-tailed Grackles. Boat-tailed Grackle eliminated because of distance from any known populations. The female Great-tailed Grackle was even larger than a male Common Grackle that was nearby at one time.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? No

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment: Viewing conditions excellent, sun shining. Viewed bird facing N. and W. sun at back with Bausch + Lomb 7x35 mm Roof Prism binoculars and Celestron 290 telescope mounted on Nikkormat FTN Camera body. Several photos taken. undeveloped at this writing.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: Have seen Boat-tailed Grackle along coast in Virginia, very familiar with Common Grackle. No previous experience with this species.

References and persons consulted before writing description: None

How long before field notes made? 24 hours this form completed? 1 1/2 day.

MAIL TO: T. H. Kent, Field Reports Editor, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City IA 52240

Great-tailed Grackle - 2+

July 3, 1983

Riverton Game Management area, Fremont Co., in ~~a~~ hedgerow
about 1/4 mile N. of headquarters building

Description: I saw only the female well. She was long + thin. I
didn't think her particularly large, but after I watched her a while
the Red-wings seemed sparrow-sized, so maybe she was. A brown
bird, unstreaked. Blackish-brown above + on wings + tail.
Dark brown below, lightest on the breast. Eye light.

Similar species: too long ~~tail~~ for ♀ Common grackle, + too
light on the breast.

Behavior: carrying food as if to a nest in the hedgerow.

Viewing conditions: afternoon (6:15 - 6:30 pm, approximately).
Sunny. Bird east of us. We would see the bird fly in or
out of the hedge or perched briefly in a bush top. Saw it
several times. 8x binoculars

Other observers: Fayce + Homer Pederson, Jean Pederson

Books, notes: We used a field guide at the time. This
documentation written July 31 from notes taken in the
field.

Barbara Wilson

Rt 1 Box 41

Hastings, La 51540

What species? Great-tailed Grackle How many? 4

Location? Riverton W.M.A., Riverton, Fremont Co., IA.

Type of habitat? Farm fields with wildlife borders

When? date(s): July 9, 1983 time: 7:50 to 8:15 A.M.C.D.T.

Who? your name and address: Peter C. Petersen, 235 McClellan Blvd., Davis #52803

others with you: Marylou Petersen, Corey Blevins, Joe Schaufelbueh, Steve Dinsman

others before or after you: before - W. Ross Silcock, Francis Moore Gordon Jones

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

♀ + yg. - large blackbird, heavy bill, plumage fairly rich brown all over, tail very large, rounded. One imm nearly black on wings + back.

♂ Glossy black plumage, about 15" long, large, rounded tail.

Voice - ravenous, rattling chatter ^{and "rick" "rick" in flight.} The 2 young seemed recently fledged.

Similar species and how eliminated: Common Grackle - larger tails especially larger ♀ brown.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? no

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:

seen on a day with clear sky. Sun at various angles to birds for various observations. Dist. est. at 30-10 yards, 10x binocs, 20x scope, 1000 mm teleph. lens

Previous experience with species and similar ones: Have seen frequently in the Southwest - Texas primarily

References and persons consulted before writing description: none

How long before field notes made? 10 min this form completed? 0 min.

MAIL TO: T. H. Kent, Field Reports Editor, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City IA 52240

What species? Great-tailed grackle How many? 2Location? Riverton WMA, Fremont Co IAType of habitat? Managed impoundments: dikes, marsh vegetation, willows.When? date(s): 8-13 time: _____ to _____Who? your name and address: M Newtonothers with you: C Benclorf T Standat R Silcock

others before or after you: _____

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

Body ~ 4x length of redwing, dark brown. Wings + tail blackish; tail very long. Bill large + heavy, forehead very flat making almost no angle with culmen

Bird ① pale brownish underparts, white eye - imm or ?

② chest streaked with brown, bill larger, eye darker, body plumage more rufous, not as scruffy as ①

Bird ② feeding bird ① with grasshoppers, in long grass on dike; when disturbed, flew to willows across ditch + perched there. When approached by ②, ① fluffed up feathers, hunched down, raised head.

Call note: husky, low-pitched, "schank", repeated 3-4x; Shined up. " - - - " or " - - - - ".

Similar species and how eliminated: size + coloration eliminate com. grackle, also dark eye of ♀ x

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? no

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:
30-50'; 8x40s; Sun behind obs.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: have seen many in TX, AZ.
Forehead profile rules out Great-tailed grackle.

References and persons consulted before writing description: _____

How long before field notes made? on spot this form completed? 11-28
Hansonbird

MAIL TO: T. H. Kent, Field Reports Editor, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City IA 52240