

**California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System**  
**California Department of Fish and Wildlife**  
**California Interagency Wildlife Task Group**

---

GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE

*Quiscalus mexicanus*

Family: ICTERIDAE  
B525

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

Written by: S. Granholm  
Reviewed by: L. Mewaldt  
Edited by: R. Duke

#### DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

A resident of southernmost California, breeding fairly commonly in Colorado River Valley and uncommonly at Salton Sea, Furnace Creek Ranch, and Diaz Lake, Inyo Co. Inhabits desert riparian, cropland, urban, and emergent wetland habitats, preferring areas where groves of trees are interspersed with residential plantings or farmlands. First recorded in California in 1964, and first recorded nesting in 1969. Wanderers recorded in San Francisco Bay area and other northern California locations. Appears likely to continue expanding range in California deserts (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

#### SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

**Feeding:** Feeds in open habitats or along shores of lakes or streams, mainly on ground or in shallow water. Omnivorous; eats insects, crustaceans, small fish, other small animals, carrion, grains, and fruits. Diet thought to resemble that of congener, boat-tailed grackle (Bent 1958), which eats mostly animal matter in spring and summer, and mostly plant matter in fall and winter (Martin et al. 1961). Boat-tailed grackle commonly eats eggs and nestlings of birds (Bent 1958).

**Cover:** Commonly uses trees and shrubs for cover. Usually roosts near or above water in trees, shrubs, thickets, or emergent vegetation. Avoids interior of dense forests.

**Reproduction:** Nest usually built near or above water, in a tree, shrub, cactus, thicket, or (less commonly) in emergent vegetation. Often nests near a residence or farm. Nest height varies from 0.6 to 15 m (2-50 ft) above ground (Selander and Giller 1961); usually 1.5 to 4.5 m (5-15 ft) (Terres 1980).

**Water:** Usually found near water, either fresh or saline; not known if drinking water is required.

**Pattern:** Prefers open habitats near water for foraging, and trees, shrubs, thickets, emergent vegetation for nesting and roosting.

#### SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

**Activity Patterns:** Yearlong, diurnal activity.

**Seasonal Movements/Migration:** Not migratory. Rapidly expanding its range in California (Garrett and Dunn 1981).

**Home Range:** No data found.

**Territory:** Male defends a nesting territory; several females build nests in each male's

territory, and each female defends a small territory around her nest (Selander and Giller 1961). Territories of males mapped by Kok (1972) were up to 45 m (150 ft) long, but were considerably narrower.

Reproduction: Breeding season begins in early April. A promiscuous, colonial breeder. Colonies in Texas have numbered thousands of nests; often in heron rookeries (Bent 1958). Clutch size usually 3 or 4 eggs, sometimes 5; incubation 13-14 days. Altricial young tended by female alone; leave nest at 20-23 days (Harrison 1978). Female normally breeds at 1 yr, but male does not (Selander and Giller 1961).

Niche: May pick off and eat ectoparasites from livestock. Male nestlings apparently require more food than females of equal age (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

Comments: Range extends eastward to southeastern Texas and southwestern Louisiana, where it becomes sympatric with its eastern congener, the boat-tailed grackle. Until 1976, these 2 grackles were considered conspecific. Thus, some previous literature on "boat tailed grackle" (e.g., Selander 1960, Tutor 1962, Rea 1969, Kok 1972) now pertains to great-tailed grackle.

## REFERENCES

- Bent, A. C. 1958. Life histories of North American blackbirds, orioles, tanagers, and allies. U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull. 211. 549pp.
- Ehrlich, P. R., D. S. Dobkin, and D. Wheye. 1988. The birder's handbook. Simon and Schuster, New York. 785pp.
- Garrett, K., and J. Dunn. 1981. Birds of southern California. Los Angeles Audubon Soc. 408pp.
- Harrison, C. 1978. A field guide to the nests, eggs and nestlings of North American birds. W. Collins Sons and Co., Cleveland, OH. 416pp.
- Harrison, C. J. O., ed. 1978. Bird families of the world. Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York. 264pp.
- Kok, O. B. 1972. Breeding success and territorial behavior of male boat-tailed grackles. *Auk* 89:528-540.
- Martin, A. C., H. S. Zim, and A. L. Nelson. 1961. American wildlife and plants, a guide to wildlife food habits. Dover Publ., Inc., New York. 500pp.
- Phillips, A. R. 1950. The great-tailed grackles of the Southwest. *Condor* 52:78-81.
- Rea, A. M. 1969. The interbreeding of two subspecies of boat-tailed grackle, *Cassidix mexicanus nelsoni* and *Cassidix mexicanus monsoni*, in secondary contact in central Arizona. M.S. Thesis, Arizona State Univ., Tempe. 131pp.
- Selander, R. K. 1960. Sex ratio of nestlings and clutch size of the boat-tailed grackle. *Condor* 62:34-44.
- Selander, R. K., and D. R. Giller. 1961. Analysis of sympatry of great-tailed and boat-tailed grackles. *Condor* 63:29-86.
- Selander, R. K., and R. J. Hauser. 1965. Gonadal and behavioral cycles in the great-tailed grackle. *Condor* 67:157-182.
- Terres, J. K. 1980. The Audubon Society encyclopedia of North American birds. A. Knopf, New York. 1100pp.
- Tutor, B. M. 1962. Nesting studies of the boat-tailed grackle. *Auk* 79:77-84.