

Devil-bird!

Article & photo by Michael McClure, South Texas Border Chapter

Among the most common, and most maligned, of South Texas birds, the Great-tailed Grackle, or “devil-bird” as some have dubbed it, has on most occasions proven as great a personal annoyance for me as the English/House Sparrow and the European Starling. I have found it a noisy, messy bully: a bird menace. During winter months, they rarely stop by, but each summer, they arrive to reclaim my yard as their personal fiefdom and seem to dare me to approach when I move to evict them. They leave if I insist, but only reluctantly and petulantly. Although I grudgingly admit that the males have a certain splendor in their plumage, I do not find them attractive birds, and the “ordinary” brown females fare even worse in the “looks” column.

Growing up in Dallas, I had never seen a grackle until I traveled to Austin in the late 1950s-early 1960s. Now, however, they constitute a common sight as far north as southern Minnesota. Since my first encounter, I have curried very little regard for them, and taking my cue from the grackle rantings of a former McAllen mayor, I have developed a number of my own special epithets for this nuisance.

A few years ago, however, an unusual young male Great-tailed Grackle visited my yard and his attire piqued my curiosity. Although obviously somewhat immature, he sported plumage that gave me the impression he was the love child of a Great-tailed Grackle and a White-winged Dove. (I entertained this fantasy in spite of my difficulty understanding what any other bird could find attractive in a grackle... Perhaps the dove was the victim of an assault, or the young bird was the result of a *blind* date.) Regardless of the affair that occasioned his birth, he had the gleaming black plumage of the male grackle but the white outer-wing primary flight feathers of a White-winged Dove. The intrigue thus established, I decided to attempt to develop some appreciation for the genus *Quiscalus* via a little research.



Young Great-tailed Grackle with unique plumage

Although three different grackle species make their homes in North America, all of which we can find in Texas, the Great-tailed Grackle claims the greatest numbers by far in our area, the others being the Boat-tailed and Common Grackles. The Great-tailed and Boat-tailed Grackles have at times been considered the same species; however, current thinking leans toward their being closely related, but different species. The Boat-tailed Grackle, appropriately enough, prefers life right along the coast.

Believed by some scholars to have been brought to Mexico by the Aztecs from the jungles of Central America for their plumage more than 500 years ago, the Great-tailed Grackle or Mexican Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) is a medium-sized, gregarious passerine bird (perching and songbirds) indigenous to both North and South America. It is one of ten extant species of grackle. (An eleventh is extinct.) Sometimes referred to as a “blackbird,” it is often called “cuervo” (crow) in areas of Mexico owing to the male’s shiny black feathers; however, it is not closely related to the genus *Corvus* even though it has some of the problem-solving ability of the crow and raven. In Mexico, the grackle is known as “el zanate.” This New World blackbird bears no relation to any of the Old World blackbirds, which are species of the *Turdus* genus. (There’s an opportunity missed...)

A slender, brash blackbird with a v-shaped tail almost as long as the rest of his body, the male Great-tailed Grackle sports plumage of iridescent black, a flat head with bright yellow eyes, and a long, black, stout, straight bill. He reaches up to 18 inches in length and weighs just under half a pound. The female is significantly smaller at 14 inches, weighs a little more than a quarter pound, and is mainly brownish-black, with a paler brown throat and belly.

Great-tailed Grackles can be found from sea level to 7,500 feet. They naturally seek chaparral and second-growth forest as habitat but avoid dense forests, deserts, or prairie habitats that lack access to water. They have also become quite comfortable in both agricultural and urban settings that provide open foraging areas, a water source, and trees or hedgerows.

In fact, unlike many animal species, grackles have benefited from the expansion of human populations due to their resourceful and opportunistic nature. Where people have modified the landscape to the liking of the Great-tailed Grackle, these birds have followed. In 1900 the northern edge of the Great-tailed Grackle’s range barely reached southern Texas. Since the 1960s, they’ve followed the spread of irrigated agriculture and urban development into the Great Plains and West, and today comprise one of North America’s fastest-expanding species. Their range stretches from Minnesota in the north, to California, Oregon, and Idaho in the west, Florida in the east, and Peru, Venezuela, and Colombia in the south. They have even been seen in Canada and are, of course, common in the cities of Central America, their ancestral home.

Great-tailed Grackles tend to congregate in large groups, popularly and understandably referred to as “plagues.” In Texas, the Southwest, and the southern Great Plains, flocks of these long-legged, social birds hop about residential lawns and golf courses, as well as visit cemeteries, fields, and marshes. Before dawn and after sundown, they often congregate in large numbers in urban areas, for example, on roofs and in tree branches (and on power lines at the McAllen intersection of Tenth and Trenton). There they caw and “sing” for long periods before taking wing to leave simultaneously until the next gathering. On winter evenings, they fill the sky with their ear-piercing racket and crowd into trees and other roosting areas, enabling them easily to detect unwanted bird species and

predators, which are mobbed when they dare intrude. These winter roosts can contain thousands of individuals, with flocks of up to half a million occurring in sugarcane fields in Texas' Rio Grande Valley.

Many people consider the grackle a noisy pest. Consisting of a large variety of raucous, cacophonous calls, the resulting "gracket" becomes especially grating when large numbers perform in chorus. The grackle can also mimic the sounds of other birds or even humans to a limited extent.

Omnivorous, Great-tailed Grackles eat plant material year-round, including grains and fruits. In rural areas, they often flock with other blackbirds to peck for seeds in feedlots, farmyards, and newly planted fields, and follow tractors to feast on the disturbed bugs. Although some believe grackles assist in pest control, farmers in many places consider grackles pests because of their large numbers and their, especially the males', penchant for grain consumption. (Because of the difficulty in thwarting the grackle's threat to crop harvests, farmers have employed hawks and other large birds of prey to help control their numbers.)

In town, Great-tailed Grackles forage in parks and other large open areas, on neighborhood lawns, and at dumps. As they hunt for food, they will turn over rocks and pick dead insects from the fronts of cars. Although they usually feed on land, they will wade into shallow water for frogs, tadpoles, small fish, and crustaceans, and even dive a few inches into water in their food quest. They have even been known to exhibit sufficient bravery to approach humans for food scraps.

In winter, Great-tailed Grackles tend to flock with their gender when they forage. In summer and early fall, they substantially increase their intake of animal matter, which comprises up to 80% of female grackle diets. Prey includes a variety of bugs, snails, worms, and slugs. They will also feed on small reptiles and mammals, as well as the eggs and offspring of other birds.

The social mating system of the Great-tailed Grackle is primarily polygynous, but individuals of both genders sometimes prove unfaithful to their social mates. The social, or territorial, males tend to be larger and will sire many more offspring than the smaller residential and transient males because the female will allow the large males to mate with her and will usually (but not always) reject smaller males.

Although first-year Great-tailed Grackle males do not mate, first-year females often do. In the breeding season, males tip their heads back and fluff up feathers to display and keep other males away. (This same behavior is used as a defensive posture to attempt to intimidate predators.) When a male spots a female, he engages her by puffing up and gaping his mouth, a display called the "ruff-out." He then proceeds to make loud calls and follow the female.

Great-tailed Grackles tend to nest in groups, several females nesting in the area of a single territorial male. Females weave a bulky, well-concealed cup of various plant and man-made materials, anchoring the rim to upright twigs or small branches and lining the nest cup with mud and a soft inner layer of fine grasses. She then produces three to four pale to bright blue eggs, which she incubates 13-14 days before the chicks hatch blind and mostly naked, with pale, salmon-colored skin.

Because they are smaller and require less food, female Great-tailed Grackle chicks are more likely than their brothers to survive to fledging. Likewise, adult females may outlive males, resulting in a “sex-biased” population with greater numbers of females than males (hence, the polygyny?). The oldest Great-tailed Grackle in the wild (based on banding records) lived 12½ years.

Twelve and a half years seems an excruciatingly lengthy time to have to tolerate such an aggravation with few, if any, evident redeeming qualities. While my research has done little to endear grackles to me, I have developed a slightly expanded respect for their perseverance and cunning. Regardless, I still resent the return of this summer plague, this DEVIL-BIRD!

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