

GREAT-TAILED GRACKLE (*QUISCALUS MEXICANUS*): A NEW SPECIES FOR HISPANIOLA

DANILO A. MEJÍA¹, MARIA M. PAULINO², KATE WALLACE³, AND STEVEN C. LATTA⁴

¹Maria Montez #38, Villa Juana, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; ²José Contrera #25, Villa Mella, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; ³Calle Jose Gabriel Garcia #105, Zona Colonial, Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; ⁴National Aviary, Allegheny Commons West, Pittsburgh, PA 15212, USA; e-mail of corresponding author: steven.latta@aviary.org

Abstract: We report on the occurrence of a new vagrant bird species for Hispaniola, and only the third record of this species in the West Indies. The Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) was identified by sight and call near Salinas de Baní, Peravia Province, on a Christmas Bird Count in December 2007. We compare our observation with characteristics of the Carib Grackle (*Q. lugubris*), Common Grackle (*Q. quiscula*), Greater Antillean Grackle (*Q. niger*), and Boat-tailed Grackle (*Q. major*).

Key words: distribution, Dominican Republic, Great-tailed Grackle, Greater Antillean Grackle, Hispaniola, *Quiscalus mexicanus*, *Quiscalus niger*

Resumen: EL ZANATE GRANDE (*QUISCALUS MEXICANUS*): NUEVA ESPECIE PARA LA ESPAÑOLA. Se presenta la aparición de una nueva especie de ave errante para La Española, y el tercer registro de esta especie en las Indias Occidentales. El Zanate Grande (*Quiscalus mexicanus*), fue identificado a vista y canto cerca de Salinas de Baní, provincia Peravia, en un Cuento Navideño de Aves en diciembre de 2007. Comparamos nuestras observaciones con las características de *Q. lugubris*, *Q. quiscula*, *Q. niger*, y *Q. major*.

Palabras claves: distribución, Española, *Quiscalus mexicanus*, *Quiscalus niger*, República Dominicana

Résumé : LE QUISCALE À LONGUE QUEUE (*QUISCALUS MEXICANUS*): UNE NOUVELLE ESPÈCE POUR HISPANIOLA. Nous rendons compte de l'apparition d'une nouvelle espèce d'oiseau erratique pour Hispaniola, ce qui constitue seulement le troisième donnée pour cette espèce dans les Antilles. Le Quiscale à longue queue (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) a été observé et entendu à proximité des Salines de Baní, Peravia, lors d'un dénombrement d'oiseaux en décembre 2007. Nous comparons notre observation avec des caractéristiques du Quiscale merle (*Q. lugubris*), du Quiscale bronzé (*Q. quiscula*), du Quiscale noir (*Q. niger*) et du Quiscale des marais (*Q. major*).

Mots clés : distribution, Hispaniola, Quiscale à longue queue, Quiscale noir, *Quiscalus mexicanus*, *Quiscalus niger*, République dominicaine

The number of vagrant species that have been reported on Hispaniola has increased dramatically in recent years (e.g., Landestoy *et al.* 2007, Dhondt and Dhondt 2008) as more and more Dominicans and Haitians take up birding, better field guides are published in local languages (Sergile 2005, Latta *et al.* 2006a-c), and more international birdwatchers visit the island. Here we report on the presence of a previously unrecorded species of grackle from the Dominican Republic, and compare field characteristics of this new Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) with those of the Carib Grackle (*Q. lugubris*), Common Grackle (*Q. quiscula*), Greater Antillean Grackle (*Q. niger*), and Boat-tailed Grackle (*Q. major*).

OBSERVATION AND IDENTIFICATION

A new vagrant was recorded on the Christmas Bird Count at Las Calderas de Baní (Christmas

count circle RDSB) at approximately 0900 on 21 December 2007. The bird was first seen by D. Mejía who was drawn to its presence by an unusual, unknown call. The bird was found perched on top of a high light pole where it was photographed (Fig. 1). It was calling with a single loud, drawn out, rising, *kriiik*, and occasionally sallying out to perhaps capture an insect. After several min the bird dropped down to the ground where it continued to feed by picking items from the ground and the water's edge while walking along the shallow salt pans. The bird appeared all black with a light yellow eye and a very long tail, and was immediately considered to be some type of grackle. On closer inspection by Mejía, Paulino, and Wallace, the bird was thought to be a first-year male, as it appeared to be all black but did not show any gloss of purple or other color on the head or upperparts.

Five species of grackles were considered as possi-



Fig. 1. Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*) near Las Calderas de Baní, Peravia Province, Dominican Republic, on 21 December 2007. Photo by Danilo A. Mejía.

ble on Hispaniola. Three species were excluded based on their small size and other characteristics. The Carib Grackle, resident of the Lesser Antilles and northeastern South America, was eliminated based on overall size and bill size. Likewise, the Common Grackle of North America was eliminated based on size and the lack of any color division between the head and back (Peer and Bollinger 1997; A. Jaramillo pers. comm.). Finally, the bird in question was considered not to be a resident Greater Antillean Grackle because it was much larger, had a noticeably longer tail, and because the eye was light yellow in color and not the bright yellow typical of *Q. niger*. It was also foraging in shallow water, unlike the typical behavior of a Greater Antillean Grackle. But perhaps the best distinguishing characteristic was the repeated call which was what first drew the attention of the group. This bird repeatedly called with a single loud, drawn out, rising, *kriiik*, unlike the Greater Antillean Grackle, which has a multi-syllabic “*chin-chi-lín*” call, from which it takes its common name.

We identified this individual as a Great-tailed Grackle, and not the similarly large Boat-tailed Grackle, based on a combination of characters. The black plumage indicated that this bird was a male, but as mentioned, the lack of a purplish-blue sheen on the head, back, and underparts suggested a hatch-year bird. As also mentioned, the tail was long and prominent, and in flight appeared as long as that of the locally common Smooth-billed Ani

(*Crotophaga ani*). Although the tail does not look extremely long in the photograph (Fig. 1), this feature is difficult to adequately assess because of the angle of the photo. In addition, the tail may take several years to reach full size; variation in tail length is striking in mixed flocks of adult males, younger males, and females when viewed in the field, as well as when viewing specimen collections (A. Jaramillo pers. comm.). Young males are intermediate in body size and tail length between females and adult males, and are not nearly as large or long-tailed as adult males. In the Dominican bird, the bill was large and heavy, and more massive than would be seen in the Boat-tailed Grackle. This bird also had a relatively flat crown to the head, typical of the Great-tailed Grackle, whereas the Boat-tailed Grackle has a more rounded crown. The eye, while expected to be bright yellow in adult Great-tailed Grackles, was in fact dusky yellow. But according to Pyle (1997), hatch-year Great-tailed Grackles can be expected to have a brownish to yellowish brown iris at least through October but as late as February, and sometimes well into their first year (A. Jaramillo pers. comm.). Finally, the call described above fits well a unique call of the Great-tailed Grackle. This is the same call as that described by Howell and Webb (1995) as “a bright, piercing ascending whistle, *wheeeeu* or *s-weeeerkl!*”, and is similar to one that is recorded by Dan Mennill from the Yucatán (available at eb2.uwindsor.ca/courses/biolog/dmennill/Mexico/GTGRwarm.mp3).

Behaviorally, the observed flycatching, as well as the gleaning from the ground and shallow water, are foraging behaviors that have been reported for the Great-tailed Grackle (Selander and Giller 1961, Johnson and Peer 2001). In addition, the species is frequently found in a wide variety of habits, but especially coastal marshes, mangroves, and wetlands (Johnson and Peer 2001). The grackle may have been in the area for some time, as a biologist working in the area reported that she had noticed the bird nearby at least several days earlier, but did not recognize its significance (Nilda Montas pers. comm.). Nevertheless, the bird was not in the immediate area later that same day (1430) when we passed by again.

SIGNIFICANCE

The Great-tailed Grackle is a resident in the United States from eastern Oregon south through California and east through Arizona and Texas. It is widespread and common throughout much of Mexico and Central America, and along the coasts of

South America from northwest Peru to northwest Venezuela. The species is not reported to have previously occurred on Hispaniola (Keith *et al.* 2003, Latta *et al.* 2006c), and has only been reported elsewhere in the West Indies on two occasions in Jamaica (Davis 2005, Vaughan *et al.* 2007), although the Jamaican reports do not make clear how the species was separated from the very similar Boat-tailed Grackle. While many vagrants make it to the Greater Antilles on the strength of hurricanes and tropical storms, a review of online weather data indicates there were no storm systems arriving from the west in the weeks prior to the discovery of this grackle.

Although a presumably ship-assisted record of a Great-tailed Grackle exists from O'ahu Island (Johnson and Peer 2001), we assume that this occurrence on Hispaniola is a result of post-breeding wandering. This is not entirely unexpected, as the Great-tailed Grackle has expanded its range dramatically in the United States over the past 30 years (Wehtje 2003), with vagrant individuals sighted as far north as Canada (AOU 1998). This species has benefited from human alteration of the environment, responding especially to the irrigation of arid areas, expansion of croplands, and increased urbanization. We suspect that in the future we may expect to see more examples of this species in the Caribbean islands.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We appreciate the comments provided by Steve N. G. Howell, Alvaro Jaramillo, Allan Keith, Susan Koenig, and Peter Pyle.

LITERATURE CITED

- AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1998. Checklist of North American birds. 7th edn. American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D. C.
- DAVIS, H. 2005. Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus*. New record for Jamaica. Broadsheet: Bird Journal for Jamaica 82.
- DHONDT, A., AND K. V. DHONDT. 2008. Two bird species new for Hispaniola. *Journal of Caribbean Ornithology* 21:46-47.
- HOWELL, S. N. G., AND S. WEBB. 1995. A guide to the birds of Mexico and northern Central America. Oxford University Press, New York.
- JOHNSON, K., AND B. D. PEER. 2001. Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus*). In *The birds of North America*, no. 576 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.
- KEITH, A., J. WILEY, S. LATTA, AND J. OTTENWALDER. 2003. The birds of Hispaniola: Haiti and the Dominican Republic. British Ornithologists' Union, Tring, UK.
- LANDESTOY, M. A., P. G. RODRIGUEZ, AND S. C. LATTA. 2007. Three new migratory bird species reported from Hispaniola. *Journal of Caribbean Ornithology* 19:113-115.
- LATTA, S. C., C. C. RIMMER, A. R. KEITH, J. W. WILEY, H. A. RAFFAELE, K. P. MCFARLAND, AND E. M. FERNANDEZ. 2006a. Aves de la República Dominicana y Haiti. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- LATTA, S. C., C. C. RIMMER, A. R. KEITH, J. W. WILEY, H. A. RAFFAELE, K. P. MCFARLAND, AND E. M. FERNANDEZ. 2006b. Les oiseaux d'Haïti et de la République Dominicaine. Princeton University Press, Princeton, N.J.
- LATTA, S. C., C. C. RIMMER, A. R. KEITH, J. W. WILEY, H. A. RAFFAELE, K. P. MCFARLAND, AND E. M. FERNANDEZ. 2006c. Birds of the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ.
- PEER, B. D., AND E. K. BOLLINGER. 1997. Common Grackle *Quiscalus quiscula*. In *The birds of North America*, no. 271 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA, and the American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, DC.
- PYLE, P. 1997. Identification guide to North American birds. Part I. Slate Creek Press, Bolinas, CA.
- SELANDER, R. K., AND D. R. GILLER. 1961. Analysis of sympatry of Great-tailed and Boat-tailed Grackles. *Condor* 63:29-86.
- SERGILE, F. E. 2005. A la decouverte des oiseaux d'Haïti. Société Audubon Haiti, Haiti.
- VAUGHAN, H., L. VAUGHAN, J. FLETCHER, AND C. FLETCHER. 2007. Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus* 24th June 2007. Broadsheet: Bird Journal for Jamaica 86:21.
- WEHTJE, W. 2003. The range expansion of the Great-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus mexicanus* Gmelin) in North America since 1880. *Journal of Biogeography* 30:1593-1607.