

## THE BOAT-TAILED GRAKLE, OR GREAT CROW BLACKBIRD.

+ *QUISCALUS MAJOR*, Vieill.

PLATE CCXX.—MALE AND FEMALE.

This elegant bird is an inhabitant of the Southern States, to the maritime portions of which it is more particularly attached. Indeed, it seldom goes farther inland than forty or fifty miles, and even then follows the swampy margins of large rivers, as the Mississippi, the Santee, the St. John's, and the Savannah. It is found in Lower Louisiana, but never ascends so far as the city of Natchez, and it abounds in the south-eastern low grounds of the Floridas, and in those of Georgia and South Carolina, as well as in the sea islands of the Atlantic coasts, as far north as Carolina, beyond which none are to be seen.

The Boat-tailed Grakles are gregarious at all seasons of the year, and frequently assemble in very large flocks, which, however, cannot be compared with those of the Purple Grakle, or of the Red-winged Starling. They seek for their food amid the large salt marshes, and along their muddy shores, and throw themselves into the rice plantations as soon as the grain is fit for being eaten by them. In autumn they resort not unfrequently to corn fields, and the ploughed lands of the plantations, interspersed with ponds or marshy places, retiring towards evening to the salt marshes, where they roost in immense flocks amid the tall marsh grass (*Spartina glabra*), from which their cries are heard until darkness comes on.

The food of this species consists principally of those small crabs called "fiddlers," of which millions are found along the margins of the rivers and mud-flats, as well as of large insects of all kinds, ground-worms, and seeds, especially grain. They frequently seize on shrimps, and other aquatic animals of a similar nature, that have been detained at low water on the banks of racoon oysters, a kind of shell-fish so named under the idea that they are eaten by the racoon. In autumn, while the rice is yet in the stack, they commit considerable mischief by feeding on the grain, although not so much as when it is in a juicy state, when the planters are obliged to employ persons to chase them from the fields.

About the beginning of February, the males have already mated, and many begin their nest at this early season. It is then that you ought to see the





*Boat-tailed Grackle.*

*1. Male. 2. Female.*

*Live Oak.*







Boat-tailed Grakle, for at that period its plumage displays the richest gloss, and its tail, which, after the breeding season, is no longer navicular, is deeply incurved towards the centre. Proud of his elegant form and splendid plumage, he alights on the topmost branch of some evergreen oak, droops his wings and tail, swells his breast, and glittering in the bright rays of the sun, which call forth all the variations of tint for which his silken plumes are remarkable, pours forth his loud though not always agreeable song. He watches his rivals as they pass, pursues them with ardent courage, returns to his stand exulting, and again pours forth his song.

No sooner has he made himself sure of the attachment of a female, than his jealous temper is subdued, and he places implicit reliance on the fidelity of his mate, in which he might be advantageously imitated by other beings. Many pairs now resort to a place previously known to them, and in the greatest harmony construct their mansions. Well do they remember the central islet of the lake, among the thickets of which, in security and comfort, their brood was reared in the previous season. Each pair choose their branch of smilax, and if the former tenement has escaped the shock of the winter winds, they repair and augment it, so as to render it fit for the reception of their eggs. If it has been destroyed, they quickly form a new one from the abundant materials around. The long-fibred Spanish moss dangles from every tree; dry twigs, withered grasses, and dead leaves lie strewn around, and the thready roots used for the lining are found in their inaccessible island. Each female now deposits her eggs, on which she sits in patient hope; while in the mean time all the male birds fly off together, and leave their mates to rear their offspring. Far away to the marshes they betake themselves, nor are they seen any more with their young, until the latter are able to join their neglectful fathers. Strange arrangement and singular, when, in other instances, Nature fills the husband and father with so much affection and solicitude! Nay, in the male Grakle has been implanted a desire to destroy the eggs of every bird, while at the same time he has been impelled to leave his mate, that she may hatch her own in security! Other species are governed by laws equally rigorous. The female Wild Turkey shuns her mate, that she may save not her eggs only, but even her young, which he would destroy; and, as I am not the only student of Nature who has witnessed the extraordinary conduct of the present species of Grakle in this respect, I am enabled to present you with some particulars supplied by my friend BACHMAN.

"In the spring of 1832, I went with Mr. LOGAN in a boat to the centre of a very large pond, about four or five feet deep, and partially overgrown with bushes. On a bush of smilax were built about thirty nests of the Boat-tailed Grakles, from three to five feet apart, some of them not more than fifteen



inches above the surface of the water. The nests contained mostly three eggs each, and were all quite fresh. The old birds were not near. In about a quarter of an hour afterwards, a flock of females appeared, sailing around us, chattering as if distressed at our intrusion. Some of them were shot, but the remainder still continued in the neighbourhood, unwilling to leave their nests. It was singular to observe that no males made their appearance. I have visited the nests of this species, when placed on live oak-trees, where they also breed in communities, thirty or forty feet above the ground. I watched the manners of the old birds, the way in which they built their nests, and their young, until fully fledged, but never found the males in the vicinity of the nests from the time the eggs were laid. The males always kept at a distance, and in flocks, feeding principally in the marshes, at this season of the year, the females alone taking charge of their nest and young. These latter are excellent eating whilst squabs. They do not leave the nest until fully fledged, although they often stand on the borders of it awaiting the arrival of the mother, squatting back into it at the least appearance of danger."

The nest of the Boat-tailed Grakle is large, and composed of dry sticks, mosses, coarse grasses, and leaves intertwined. The interior is formed of fine grass, circularly disposed, and over this is a lining of fibrous roots. The eggs are four or five, of a dull white colour, irregularly streaked with brown and black. This species raises only one brood in the season, and the young are able to follow their mother, on wing, by the 20th of June. The period at which these birds usually lay is about the 1st of April, but this varies according to latitude, and I believe that the very old birds breed earlier than the others.

When the Boat-tailed Grakles breed on the tall reeds that border upon bayous or grow on the margins of lakes, especially in Louisiana and the Floridas, the cries of the young when they are nearly fledged frequently attract the attention of the alligator, which, well knowing the excellence of these birds as articles of food, swims gently towards the nest and suddenly thrashing the reeds with his tail, jerks out the poor nestlings and immediately devours them. One or two such attacks so frighten the parent Grakles, that, as if of common accord, they utter a chuck, when the young scramble away among the reeds towards the shore, and generally escape from their powerful enemies. This species, the Red-winged Starling and the Crow Blackbird, ascend and descend the reeds with much celerity and ease, holding on by their feet. In that portion of East Florida called the "Ever Glades," the Boat-tailed Grakles frequently breed in company with the Little Bittern (*Ardea exilis*), the Scolopaceous Courlan and the Common Gallinule; and when on trees, along with the Green Heron.



The flight of this bird exhibits long and decided undulation, repeated at intervals of about forty yards, it being performed at a considerable elevation, and protracted to a great distance. It flies in loose flocks, when it never ceases to utter its peculiar cry of *kirrick, crick, crick*. In autumn, or as soon as the females and their broods associate with the males, their movements are regular from south to north, while returning towards their roosting places, and the reverse next morning when going out to look for food. They seldom rise from the rushes in compact bodies, unless they should happen to be surprised. At the report of a gun they fly to a great distance, and are always extremely shy and wary. The female does not carry her tail so deeply incurved as the male. During the breeding season they return to their stand, after a chase, with a quivering motion of the wings, and the tail is more deeply incurved than at any other season.

The notes of these birds are harsh, resembling loud shrill whistles, frequently accompanied with their ordinary cry of *crick, crick, cree*. In the love season they are more pleasing, being changed into sounds resembling *tirit, tirit, titiri, titiri, titireē*, rising from low to high with great regularity and emphasis. The young when first able to fly emit a note not unlike the whistling cry of some of our frogs.

Some of these Grakles migrate from the Carolinas and Georgia, although fully a third remain during the winter. At that season they frequently associate with the Fish Crow, and alight on stakes in the mud flats close to the cities, where they remain for a considerable time emitting their cry. They are fond of the company of cattle, walking among them in the manner of the European Starling and our own Cow Bunting, but they never enter the woods. On the ground they walk in a stately and graceful manner, with their tail rather elevated, and jetting it at each cluck.

The males often attack birds of other species, driving them from their nest, and sucking their eggs. I have seen seven or eight of them teasing a Fish Hawk for nearly an hour, before they gave up the enterprise. When brought to the ground wounded, they run off at once, make for the nearest tree, assist themselves by the bushes about it, and endeavour to get to the top branches, moving all the while so nimbly, that it is difficult to secure them. They bite and scratch severely, often bringing blood from the hand.

They are courageous birds, and often give chase to Hawks and Turkey Buzzards. My friend Dr. SAMUEL WILSON of Charleston, attempted to raise some from the nest, having found four young ones in two nests, and for some weeks fed them on fresh meat, but they became so infested with insects that notwithstanding all his care they died.

In the plate are represented a pair in full spring plumage. I have placed them on their favourite live-oak tree.



I found this species abundant and breeding along the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, from the mouths of the Mississippi to within the maritime portions of the Texas, in every suitable place, forming its nests principally among the tall reeds of the salt marshes. The eggs measure one inch three-eighths in length, and seven-eighths in breadth, being of an elongated oval form. The name of Boat-tailed Grakle has been of late given to our Common Crow Blackbird, *Quiscalus versicolor*, which in my opinion is improper, in our country at least, where all original well-known names ought to be retained, were it for no other reason than to prevent inconvenience to students. No one in Kentucky, for example, would know what was meant by "Little Rusty-crowned Falcon," but would point out at once to any inquirer the "Sparrow Hawk."

QUISCALUS MAJOR, Bonap Syn., p. 54.

GREAT CROW BLACKBIRD, *Quiscalus major*, Bonap. Amer. Orn., vol. i. p. 35.

GREAT CROW BLACKBIRD, *Quiscalus major*, Nutt. Man., vol. i. p. 192.

BOAT-TAILED GRAKLE OR GREAT CROW BLACKBIRD, *Quiscalus major*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. ii. p. 504; vol. v. p. 480.

Tail very long, graduated, with the feathers slightly concave above. Male with the plumage silky, splendid, the head and neck deep purplish-blue, the back, breast, and sides deep blue, passing into green behind, the rump bronzed black; the wings and tail black, glossed with green, the abdomen, lower tail-coverts, and tibial feathers, plain black. Female much smaller, with the tail shorter, the plumage unglossed beneath, and but slightly glossy above, the upper parts dusky, with slight tints of green and blue; the head and neck dull brown; the lower parts light yellowish-brown, the tibial feathers and lower tail-coverts dusky.

Male,  $15\frac{7}{8}$ ,  $23\frac{3}{4}$ . Female,  $12\frac{5}{8}$ , 18.

Abundant from Texas to North Carolina along the coast. Up the Mississippi about 200 miles. Constantly resident.

In a male, from the mouths of the Mississippi, preserved in spirits, the palate is convex, with two longitudinal ridges, anteriorly with a middle and two lateral ridges. The tongue is 1 inch 2 twelfths long, slender, horny nearly in its whole length, sagittate and papillate at the base, concave above, its greatest breadth  $2\frac{1}{2}$  twelfths, tapering to a lacerated thin point, and with the edges also lacerated for nearly half an inch from the tip. The posterior aperture of the nares is oblong behind, linear before, with strong papillæ on the edges. The œsophagus is  $5\frac{1}{2}$  twelfths long, its width 7 twelfths at the commencement, then contracting to 4 twelfths, again slightly dilated to 5 twelfths; the proventriculus also 5 twelfths in width, its glands forming a belt  $7\frac{1}{2}$  twelfths in breadth. The stomach is elliptical, 1 inch 2 twelfths



long,  $10\frac{1}{2}$  twelfths in breadth; its muscular coat moderately thick, the right lateral muscle 2 twelfths; the epithelium dense, tough, longitudinally rugous, and dark brown. The intestine is of moderate length and width, the former being 15 inches, the latter averaging 3 twelfths; the cœca an inch and a half long.

The trachea is  $3\frac{1}{2}$  inches long, much flattened, from  $3\frac{1}{2}$  twelfths to  $2\frac{1}{2}$  twelfths in breadth; its rings about 70, very thin, with 2 dimidiate rings. The bronchi are wide, of about 12 very slender cartilaginous half rings. The lateral muscles are slender, as are the sterno-tracheal slips; and there are four pairs of inferior laryngeal muscles.

The digestive and respiratory organs of this bird do not differ materially from those of the Crows, Starlings, and Thrushes, but the œsophagus having a slight dilatation indicates some affinity to the Conirostres.

Individuals of both sexes, but especially males, differ greatly in size, from the time they obtain their full plumage until they are several years old, the difference sometimes amounting to several inches in the length of the birds, and affording an excellent opportunity of manufacturing new species.

THE LIVE OAK, *QUERCUS VIRENS*, Willd., Sp. Pl., vol. iv. p. 425. Pursh, Fl. Amer. Sept., vol. ii. p. 626.—*MONECIA POLYANDRIA*, Linn.—*AMENTACEÆ*, Juss.

The live oak attains a great size, spreading out its large arms to the distance sometimes of twenty yards, but seldom reaching to a proportionate height. Splendid avenues of this valuable tree are frequently seen in Georgia, South Carolina, and many of the sea islands, leading to the planters' houses. A few miles below New Orleans are some, probably centuries old, which are the finest I have seen. I have not observed this tree far above the city of Natchez on the Mississippi, nor farther eastward than the central maritime parts of North Carolina. It prefers flat rich soils, and is rarely found at any great distance from rivers or the sea-shore. The leaves are evergreen, leathery, oblong-elliptical, obtuse at the base, acute at the tip, with the edges revolute, and the lower surface downy; the cupule is turbinate, with short scales; the acorn oblong, sweet, and to the taste of some equal to the hazel-nut.





*Boat-tailed Grackle.*

*1. Male. 2. Female.*

*Live Oak.*





Audubon, John James. 1842. "The Boat-Tailed Grakle, or Great Crow Blackbird, *Quiscalus major*, Vieill. [Pl. 220]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 4, 52–57. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319333>

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