

Great-tailed Grackle *Quiscalus mexicanus*

Otherworldly shrieks, brazen demeanor, and a tail that defies the laws of aerodynamics made the arrival of the Great-tailed Grackle in San Diego County impossible to miss. Few other birds have spread in North America so aggressively. Invading from the Imperial Valley, Arizona, and Sonora, the Great-tailed Grackle was first recorded in San Diego County in 1977 and first noted nesting in 1988. After that it increased rapidly, by the new millennium becoming a locally common resident around lakes and marshes. Though largely a wetland species, usually nesting over or near water, the Great-tailed Grackle is almost a commensal of man. It forages on lawns, around livestock, and in the food courts of shopping centers as long as these are within commuting distance of marshes.

Breeding distribution: As a newly colonizing species, the Great-tailed Grackle has a distribution that is still patchy, though quickly filling in. The patches or colonies are scattered throughout the county at low to moderate elevations. Current regions of concentration in the coastal lowland are as follows: along the San Luis Rey River from Oceanside (H5) to Pala (D10), with up to 50 in the San Luis Rey valley near Interstate 15 (E9) 14 May 2000 (C. and D. Wysong); Lake Hodges/San Pasqual Valley, with up to 40 at the lake (K10) 14 June 1999 (R. L. Barber); from Santee to Lakeside, with up to 20 at Santee Lakes (P12) 10 May 1998 and 21 March 1999 (B. C. Moore); Lower Otay Lake (U13), with up to 50 on 11 April 2001



Photo by Kenneth W. Fink

(T. W. Dorman); and the Dairy Mart pond in the Tijuana River valley (V11; 20 on 12 March 2000, P. Unitt). Higher in the foothills the species is sparser, but substantial colonies are in San Vicente Valley (L16; up to 20 on 27 June 2000, J. D. Barr) and at Sunshine Summit (D17), where the grackles nest at ponds in a mobile-home park (up to 40 on 3 June 2001, P. K. Nelson). At 3310 feet elevation the latter is highest colony in the county. Great-tailed Grackles nest also at lakes, ponds, and marshes on the Campo Plateau, from Potrero (U20) to Jacumba (U28). In this region they are still in small numbers except at Jacumba (up to 25 on 21 April 1999, F. L. Unmack). In the Anza-Borrego Desert the grackle is confined as a breeding species to developed areas, in the Borrego Valley (up

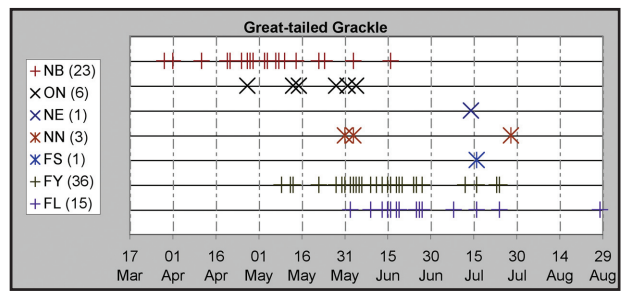
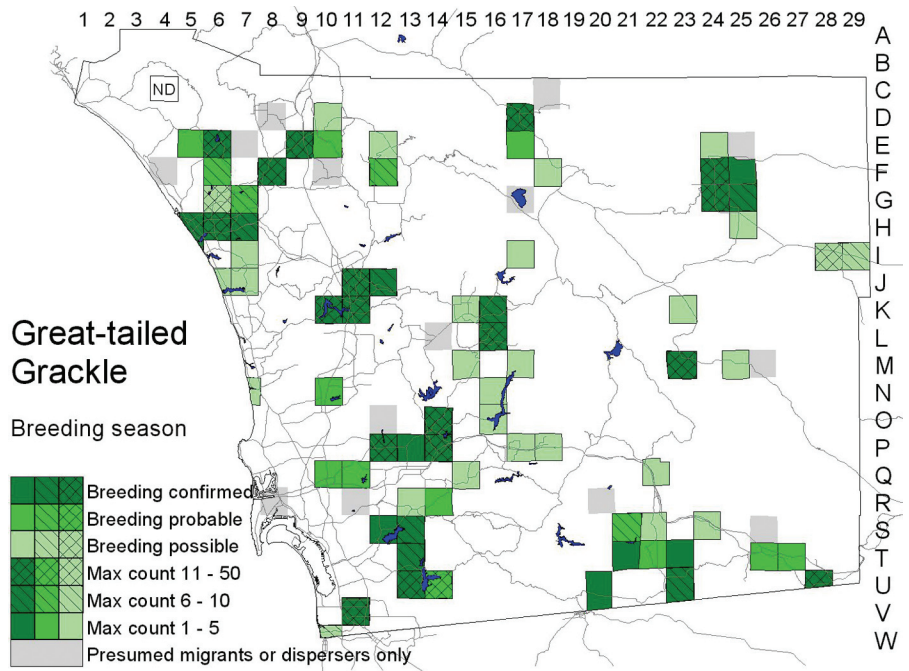
to 24 at Club Circle, Borrego Springs, G24, 15 April 2001, L. and M. Polinsky), at Ocotillo Wells (I28/I29; up to 13 on 26 April 2001, J. R. Barth), and at Butterfield Ranch (M23; up to 25 on 22 May 2001, P. K. Nelson). Only single grackles were seen at other desert locations (Earthquake Valley, Vallecito, Agua Caliente County Park), though the species could colonize them too.

Nesting: The Great-tailed Grackle is flexible in its choice of nest site, often in stands of cattails, as at Sunshine Summit, Lower Otay Lake, and Jacumba, but also in willows, as in the Tijuana River valley, palms, as in the Heart of Africa exhibit at the Wild Animal Park, and ornamental shade trees, as in the schoolyard at Borrego Springs. Like those of the smaller marsh blackbirds, the nest is supported from the side by several leaves or stems. The birds are colonial and frequently polygynous (Johnson et al. 2001).

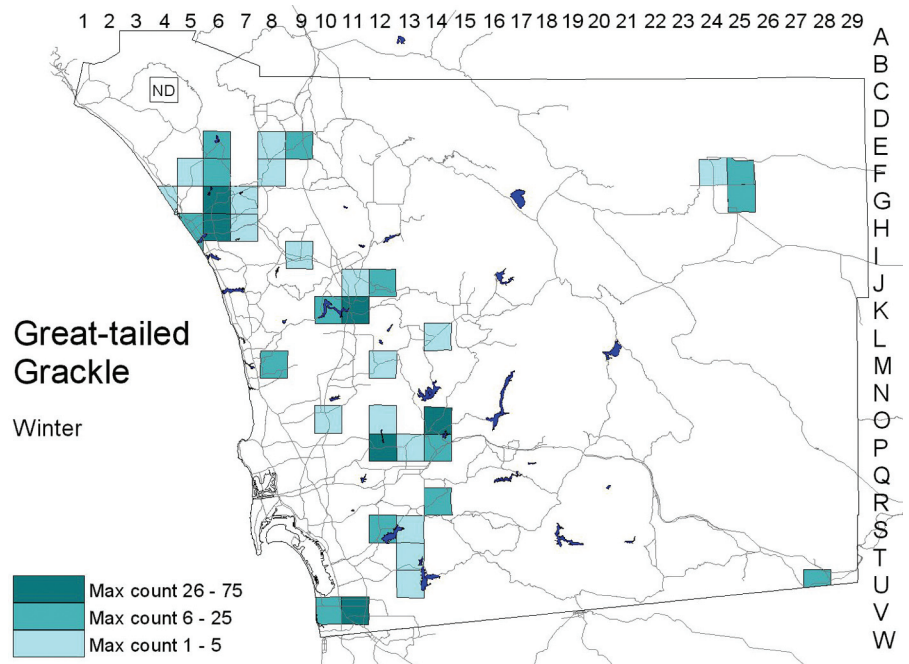
Atlas results constitute the first significant body of information on the Great-tailed Grackle's nesting schedule in San Diego County. Nest building starts as early as 29 March (1997, along the San Diego River near Lakeside, P13, D. C. Seals), but no observations of adult females carrying food items suggest egg laying earlier than 25 April. The birds continue to lay until at least 1 July, as implied by a nest with eggs at the upper end of Sweetwater Reservoir (S13) 14 July 1997 and a nest with nestlings there 28 July 1997 (P. Famolaro). Fledglings may still be following their mothers late in the summer, as at the Roadrunner Club, Borrego Springs (F24), 28 August 2000 (P. Unitt).

Migration: The Great-tailed Grackle's schedule of movement in and out of the higher elevations where it does not winter is still poorly known. Our earliest date for these areas is 12 March (2000, one in San Vicente Valley, L16, J. D. Barr). Grackles are seen occasionally away from breeding colonies even in June (two in Chihuahu Valley, C18, 2 June 2001, J. M. and B. Hargrove; one in Corte Madera Valley, R20, 20 June 1998, J. E., and K. Berndes).

Winter: At this season, the Great-tailed Grackle's distribu-



tion in the coastal lowland is similar to that in the breeding season. The birds vacate elevations above 1000 feet almost completely, however, disappearing from Sunshine Summit, the Ramona area, and the Campo Plateau except



Jacumba (up to eight on 1 February 2000 and 23 January and 16 February 2001, F. L. Unmack). In the Anza-Borrego Desert, wintering grackles are known only from developed areas around Borrego Springs, where their numbers may be somewhat smaller than in the breeding season (maximum count 13 on 30 December 1998, P. D. Ache). In the coastal lowland, occasional individuals or small flocks wander some distance from known colonies (e.g., six in San Dieguito Valley, M8, 23 December 2001, P. Unitt); presumably this is how new colonies are pioneered.

Conservation: Over much of San Diego County, the Great-tailed Grackle population appeared to be entering its exponential growth phase in the late 1990s. The species was first recorded in the county at Sweetwater Reservoir (S12) 5 February 1977 (AB 31:375, 1977) but not again until November 1981. After that, however, sightings increased rapidly. The first recorded breeding was in July 1988, at the Dairy Mart pond in the Tijuana River valley (V11), when two pairs fledged young (G. McCaskie, AB 42:1341, 1988). This colony grew quickly, and new ones soon formed elsewhere. In the Tijuana River valley, however, grackle numbers peaked in 1993, when the total

on the San Diego Christmas bird count hit 200. Smaller numbers since suggest the colony may be limited by lack of foraging habitat. In spite of the Great-tailed Grackle's ready use of man-made environments, urban development offers little habitat to a large bird that feeds its young principally on insects taken from the ground.

Taxonomy: The first Great-tailed Grackles reaching California arrived from Sonora or southern Arizona. The earliest specimens were *Q. m. nelsoni* (Ridgway, 1901), the smallest of the subspecies, in which the females are pale—honey blonde on the breast when in fresh plumage. By the late 1980s some specimens closer to the larger *Q. q. monsoni* (Phillips, 1950), with dark females, had invaded the Imperial Valley, after colonizing central Arizona from the Chihuahuan Desert and blending with *nelsoni* (Rea 1969, Patten et al. 2003). The two specimens so far available from San Diego County, one picked up in a residential area two blocks from the Dairy Mart Road colony 12 July 1999 (SDNHM 50303), the other from Camp Del Mar in Camp Pendleton (G4) 30 June 2001 (S. M. Wolf, SDNHM 50569), are both juveniles; in juvenile plumage *nelsoni* and *monsoni* are not well differentiated.