

more nesting activity by House Wrens. Caution should be used when interpreting nesting status, as the males are noted for building dummy nests that never get used (Kennedy and White 1992).

I wish to thank Lex Glover for reviewing this note.

Literature Cited

- Johnson, L. S. 1998. House Wren (*Troglodytes aedon*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 380 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, PA.
- Kennedy, E. D., and D. W. White. 1992. Nest building in House Wrens. *Journal of Field Ornithology* 63: 35–42.
- Post, W., and S. A. Gauthreaux, Jr. 1989. Status and distribution of South Carolina birds. *Contributions from the Charleston Museum*, No. 18.
- Sprunt, A., Jr., and E. B. Chamberlain. 1949. *South Carolina bird life*, with a 1970 supplement by E. M. Burton. University of South Carolina Press, Columbia.

Boat-tailed Grackle Uses a Marsh Wren Nest as a Platform: An Example of Limited Nest Site Availability in Salt Marshes

William Post, John A. Herbert and Megan Barks

Charleston Museum, 360 Meeting Street, Charleston, SC 29403

On 15 July 2003, Herbert and Barks found a Boat-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus major*) nest that had been built on top of a Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus palustris*) nest, located in smooth cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*) growing on the edge of a tidal creek joining the Stono River, Johns Island, Charleston County, South Carolina. Neither the grackle nest nor the wren nest was in use, although the grackle nest contained one egg, which upon examination appeared to have been abandoned for at least two weeks. The grackle nest was 1.2 m above the mud and within 1 m of the creek edge. The height of the cordgrass to which the nests were attached, and that of the surrounding grass, was 2 m. The grackle nest was an open cup, outside diameter, 18 cm; height, 11 cm, both within the reported range for the species (Post et al. 1996). Although the grackle nest was attached to six stems of cordgrass, the top of the wren nest (10 x 18 cm) formed the main support for its nest (Fig. 1; specimen no. ChM 2003.).

The wren nest had a well-defined entrance hole and was lined, which would indicate that it had been occupied by a female (Kroodsma and Verner 1997), but it had no traces of egg shells or other materials indicating that it had actually held eggs. The grackle nest did not appear to have fledged young, as the nest was not fouled, as would have been the case if it had produced fledglings (Post et al. 1996).



Figure 1. Boat-tailed Grackle nest built on Marsh Wren nest in *Spartina alterniflora*, Johns Island, South Carolina, 15 July 2003. Digital photograph by Peter S. Coleman.

The grackle nest was about 300 m from the closest grackle nesting colony, which was in several southern red cedars (*Juniperus silicicola*) on a spoil island. Isolated nests are uncommon in the Boat-tailed Grackle. This case may represent the nesting of a first-year female or that of a female that had failed in its first nesting attempt (Post 1998).

Although several publications state that Boat-tailed Grackles nest in salt marshes, we have been unable to locate any specific documentation of their nesting in smooth cordgrass, which is the predominant vegetation of regularly-flooded salt marshes on the Atlantic coast. Our survey is based on data from 1200 oology slips and nest cards filed at the Charleston Museum. Boat-tailed Grackles that nest in non-tidal marshes occasionally use old nests as platforms for new ones (Post et al. 1996).

Sprunt (1958) reported that Boat-tailed Grackles nested in “Bullrushes (*Spartina alterniflora*)”. The vernacular name he used for *S. alterniflora* may mean that he was referring to *Scirpus* spp. (bullrush), which grow in low-salinity (irregularly-flooded) marshes at higher elevations. Among passerines found on the Atlantic coast, it appears that only Marsh Wrens regularly nest in regularly-flooded (low) salt marshes. This niche is available to wrens because of their ability to weave their nests into supporting vegetation, and thus at heights above spring tides (Kale 1965.) Although Marsh Wren nests

are not well concealed, their contents are well hidden within a domed structure.

Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) occasionally nest in regularly-flooded salt marshes (Post 1988) but like Marsh Wrens must select nest sites that are high enough to avoid flooding. Unlike wrens, however, blackbirds must place their open nests low enough so that they are well concealed by surrounding vegetation. These conflicting requirements greatly reduce nest site availability for Red-winged Blackbirds in the same way that they would for Boat-tailed Grackles.

Our findings indicate that given suitable substrates, female Boat-tailed Grackles are able to colonize low salt marshes. In such habitats, suitable nest sites are usually lacking, however, which would preclude aggregations of nesting females. As nest success in this species is related to coloniality (Post 1994, 1998), isolated nests such as the one described here may rarely succeed.

Literature Cited

- Kale, H. W. II. 1965. Ecology and bioenergetics of the Long-billed Marsh Wren *Telmatodytes palustris griseus* (Brewster) in Georgia salt marshes. Publications of the Nuttall Ornithological Club, No. 5.
- Kroodsma, D. E. and J. Verner. 1997. Marsh Wren *In* The Birds of North America, No. 308 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.), The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA, and the American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, DC.
- Post, W. 1988. Reproductive success in New World marsh-nesting passerines. Acta XIX Congressus Internationalis Ornithologici: 2645-2656. Ottawa, Canada.
- Post, W. 1994. Are female Boat-tailed Grackle colonies neutral assemblages? Behavioral Ecology and Sociobiology 35:401-407.
- Post, W. 1995. Reproduction of female Boat-tailed Grackles: Comparisons between South Carolina and Florida. Journal of Field Ornithology 66:221-230.
- Post, W. 1998. Advantages of coloniality in female Boat-tailed Grackles. Wilson Bulletin 110: 489-496.
- Post, W., J. P. Poston, and G. T. Bancroft. 1996. Boat-tailed Grackle (*Quiscalus major*). *In* The Birds of North America, No. 207 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.), The Academy of Natural Sciences, Philadelphia, PA, and the American Ornithologists' Union, Washington, D.C.
- Sprunt, A., Jr. 1958. *Cassidix mexicanus torreyi* (Harper). Eastern Boat-tailed Grackle. Pp 365-374 *in* Life Histories of North American Blackbirds, Orioles, Tanagers, and Allies (A. C. Bent, ed.). U.S. National Museum Bulletin 211.