



A juvenile Boat-tailed Grackle is torn between its mother's foraging activities and the boiled peanut debris on my shirt.



The beginning of a complete molt into its non-breeding plumage is evident in this Black Tern's motley appearance.

## **Brunswick Wildlife Miss Annie, Boiled Peanuts, & Dawg Days Birding**

Dawg days are NOT the best time for birding in the Lower Cape Fear; however, we work hard at it and hope serendipity drops by. Also, I point my camera at ditch banks and roadsides, photographing anything that flies, runs, or slithers while dreaming of the fall bird migration and coming football season.

On a recent mid-July adventure, I had multiple non-birding goals including breakfast at the coffee house before stopping by the farmer's market on the Garrison House lawn for maters and cukes.

During breakfast, a huge thunderstorm washed out the market; however, I got there before the last produce vendor packed up. In addition to my target veggies, they had freshly boiled green peanuts! I bought a bag and returned to my SUV parked below and joyfully ate them as Laughing Gulls and Boat-tailed Grackles watched through my open window.

While photographing the onlookers and small flocks of pelicans streaming by, I watched the next squall line approaching from upriver, hoping for a waterspout photo op. All in all it was a wonderful adventure...typical, however, of the vagaries of dawg days birding.

Dawg days remind me of Miss Annie, my wonderful grandmother, who lived in Duplin County. Memories of boiled green peanuts, very sweet lemonade made in galvanized pails,

and fireflies floating across the lawn return...memories of what in addition to family made those warm evenings very special.

Miss Annie was never accused of skimping on the salt or the sugar. The family's cardinal rule was that you can never use too much salt in boiling green peanuts.

Many years later while attending my first football game at Florida Field, I quickly noted a number of vendors walking through the stands selling boiled peanuts. Gator football and boiled peanuts! Surely I had moved a little closer to heaven. After about 30 minutes of the heat, I started to believe I had taken a wrong turn somewhere.

During the last week of July, serendipity towed me out of the summer birding doldrums. Two longtime friends of the fishing and birding persuasion decided to come down for a birding-by-boat adventure. The boat owner lives in Fairfax, VA and he was joined by the other from Falmouth, MA before towing the boat to the Southport marina.

On Wednesday we went up the river as far as the railroad bridge at Navassa. Unfortunately we were accompanying an incoming tide so we had high tide all trip until we returned to the Battery Island area that afternoon.

We saw many species of herons and egrets plus several Ospreys. Least Terns around Eagles Island were perching on crab pot buoys and near the port, an adult and a juvenile pelican were sitting on a dock posing for me. The juvenile was still smaller than the adult and wearing a band...a member of the class of 2010.

On our return a closer look at South Pelican Island revealed a sandy point full of terns, pelicans, and Laughing Gulls. It looked like many of this year's juveniles were out on the mud with their parents. The juvenile Laughing Gulls seemed to outnumber the adults...probably because clutches normally have three eggs and for now most hatchlings had survived.

On Friday, we birded Ft. Caswell's beaches and marsh from the water and Bald Head Island and the Cape Fear point shoals by golf cart and foot. We planned to look for shorebirds on sand bars on the return once the tide receded.

Our reward for braving the heat and full sun was a six-tern day at Bald Head: Royal, Sooty, Least, Common, Sandwich, and Black Terns. On one occasion, eight Black Terns were in view, all in different stages of molt.

Black Terns were our target birds. Small numbers start to trickle through by mid-July, so to me they are always the harbinger of the fall migration. Early on, they are a special treat because they may be seen in their mostly-black breeding plumage.

Black Terns are small terns that eat insects as well as fish and nest on freshwater lakes and wetlands in the northern United States and Canada. They generally migrate inland and overwinter in saltwater habitats on the coasts of Central and South America.

The Sooty was our rare bird for the trip, in that it was not out over the Gulf Stream. It was out of camera range on a separate, inaccessible shoal; however, we were able to get good views by spotting scope.

Sooty Terns inhabit tropical and subtropical oceans worldwide and generally nest on very remote islands. They are common breeders in the Caribbean and non-breeding and post-breeding Sooties are uncommon but fairly regular in the summer offshore near the Gulf Stream. They are pelagic birds that generally only come onshore for breeding.

Least Terns, local breeders on our natural and spoil-based coastal islands, are our smallest terns. They migrate south to winter across the coasts of Central and South America, returning in spring to breed.

After photographing the birds on Cape Fear point, we waited out an awesome thunderstorm at the Bald Head Marina and returned to Southport on the back edge of the storm...to be rewarded with a pleasant, cooler evening. Dining outside on the waterfront watching a wonderful sunset with a wonderful breeze in our face!

At day's end, given the final tern was the rare Sooty, I recalled one of Miss Annie's favorite sayings "...one good tern deserves another". At least that's what I think she said...

John Ennis



Well upriver, at high tide, we saw a number of Least Terns resting on crab pot buoys.