Rails

Rich Stallcup

It is four am, and except for the occasional gurgling of western toads and weak trills from insomniac wrens, the marsh is quiet. Through the dangling mist, a Barn Owl ghosts low above the tules, silently prepared to quarter and drop on anything that moves. Suddenly and spontaneously a burst of raucous voices fills the void, sounding like the response to a dirty joke at a VFW convention, Virginia Rails. A high, trilling whiny follows. Sora. All this to sort out patches of territory—the damp equivalent of a coyote howl.

Because of their mostly nocturnal habits and botanically dense habitats, rails are more often heard than seen. Their voices are weird and distinctive, very much worth some night hours of listening. To see three species just takes time in early morning or late afternoon, watching the edge of their darkness. A visual connection with either of the two small rails, however, takes exceptional luck or answered prayers.

The Clapper

There are three California populations of Clapper Rail, and these are the only ones in the western U.S. All three are fragile and could easily be “incidentally” exterminated. At San Francisco Bay, the northern race barely clings to the remaining 5% (the outermost Spartina margin) of natural habitat. In southern California, the situation is worse. There, the

“Light-footed” Clapper Rail hangs on in fragments of salt and brackish marsh that have thus far been preserved: there isn’t much, and big money interests would just love a chance to drain and develop the rest. “Yuma” Clapper Rails probably include more birds than either of the other two California populations. They are precariously at the south end of the Salton Sea (where water levels fluctuate radically) and on the lower Colorado River, mostly between Needles and Laguna Dam (a favored area for big-bore motorboat enthusiasts).

Voice. Usually a series of short, unmusical “oinks” or “kicks” on the same pitch, occasionally increasing in volume and speed as if toward a climax, only to slow down, be quiet, and continue. There is also a descending series of 8 to 12 “quacks,” similar to those of Virginia Rail but louder and more duck-like. Another call is quiet and composed of three notes, two on the same pitch and the third lower. It may sound alarmingly similar to the song of Black Rail!

Note: There may be more Light-footed and Yuma Clapper Rails in Mexico than in the U.S. Since large tracts of unmonitored salt marsh remain along the Pacific coast of Baja from Ensenada to Laguna Ojo de Liebre and Laguna San Ignacio, stable

Rich holds a Black Rail rescued from flood-tide predators.

Clapper Rail populations remain there. Below the Imperial Dam, where only a small fraction of the Colorado River is allowed to trickle south toward Sonora and northeast Baja, a few Clapper Rails have trickled too. There are recent records at Morelos Dam and Las Carapillas.

Virginia and Sora

Virginia Rails and Sora favor freshwater marshes, usually composed of tules or sedges. They also frequent the narrow edges of ponds or slow rivers with only small patches of shelter. During winter, both may be scattered sparsely in salt marshes. These two, like Clapper Rails, do much of their foraging on open mud—but never more than a moment's sprint from deep cover.

Though scarce (but findable, with some effort), both of these species were formerly abundant throughout North America and probably numbered millions in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys before the massive delta marshes were diked and drained. If humans will have the grace and wisdom to restore wetlands, these birds will increase. If marsh-bashing continues, they and many other dependent forms will go spinning down the drain of extinction.

Voice. Virginia Rails have a large vocabulary including the quacking, descending laugh mentioned above. Next most often heard is the flat, unmusical, two-syllabled “kid-dick, kid-dick,” or “chickit-chickit,” which may crack on for several minutes. Soras deliver a shrill, descending, rapid whinny, mostly during the breeding season, and a softly whistled, rising “surree” or (if you try hard enough) “sooorna.” Both of these medium-sized rails also have several location or conversational notes that are quiet. Except for the usefulness of each species' two primary vocalizations, these birds should be identified visually.

The Yellow

In California, Yellow Rails nested in damp, grassy meadows east of the Sierra escarpment well into the first half of this century. This was most recently recorded at Bridgeport, Mono County. Some serious searches there after 1965 failed to locate any birds. The fact that each locality hosting appropriate habitat had
been trashed by the amphibious presence of cattle was thought to have caused the demise. Recently, a breeding colony was found near Klamath Falls, Oregon, and it is likely that a systematic search in the northern and eastern California Great Basin will detect some current Yellow Rail activity.

In the late 1800s, Yellow Rails were also regular along the central California coast during winter, and numerous specimens were taken. Most records were from the vicinity of Point Reyes Station, where today levees (to create pasture for dairy Holsteins) and two roads have fragmented the former marsh and eliminated the classic Yellow Rail habitat.

Contrary to what one might read about Yellow Rail distribution in California in winter, there are fewer than eight records of the species in the last 50 years! At least three of these were of live birds in pickleweed (Salicornia) marshes, perhaps their best habitat choice in lieu of finding their favorite damp grassy fields. One of these winter records was a Yellow Rail caught and killed by a Great Egret during a winter flood tide.

**Voice.** A long series of "tic" notes, alternating between bundles of two and three—"tic tic tic," "tic tic tic," "tic tic tic"—which can be imitated by ticking two pebbles or two quarters together. In northern Minnesota at midnight, after a long but successful slog to seek the elusive Yellow Rail, a weary and wet, but happy, birder asks, "How does the bird make that strange, unmusical sound?" "By ticking two pebbles together," the leader says.

**The Black Rail**

Black Rails nest in delicate, threatened habitats around the north end of San Francisco, San Pablo, and Suisun bays, but since their behavior is more like that of a mouse than any bird, they are rarely seen. There is some post-breeding dispersal into marshes edging south San Francisco Bay but, because of development, no longer any Black Rail nesting there. Fewer than 80 of these birds remain along the lower Colorado River, and fewer than 50 at the south end of the Salton Sea and the rest of western Imperial County. A few scattered around western Marin County complete the Black Rail’s bleak distribution picture for all of western North America. None are presently known in western Mexico.

**San Francisco Bay Clapper Rail.**

The best chance to see a Black Rail is to stand on the boundary of a marsh known to contain birds or, at least, "old-growth" Salicornia during a winter flood tide. The tide must be at least 6.5 feet with rain or at least 7.0 feet without. If luck is on your side, you may see a Black Rail flying from the inundated vegetation of the outer marsh toward a better place to hide. These birds are often killed by predators (mostly Great Egrets, some Northern Harriers) during these periods, so be prepared for a blend of happy and sad emotions.

**Voice.** The song, often written as "kicky-doo," is loud, winding, and electric, most unlike the voice of any other animal (but see Clapper Rail, above). During the breeding season as well as in the rest of the year, however, another voice is more common: a high, growly, machine-gun-like "grrr, grrr, grrr, grrr, grrr." This is probably delivered by males and females alike and is usually in response to another bird, or to herald an irritable disposition. A high, peeping, "yip-yip-yip," heard in late summer, may be the cry of fledged juveniles.

In addition to the Great Egrets and harriers mentioned as Black Rail enemies during flood tides, owls may be primary nesting-season predators. Since Black Rails singing loudly at night without changing position, it is likely that some are picked off from above. In June 1988, during nuro’s extensive survey of Black Rails in San Francisco Bay, Robin Leong and I found a single owl pellet in a clearing on the large Salicornia marsh at Mare Island, San Pablo Bay. It was probably cast by a Barn Owl and contained remains of two salt marsh harvest mice, the left lower mandible of a shrew (yet to be identified), and the complete skull and other bones of a Black Rail. California cuisine.

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**The Bottom Line on rails is that three out of five species occurring in California are hanging on by threads, and the other two, though not in immediate trouble, have been vastly reduced in this century. Wetlands is the word: salt, brackish, fresh, and upland. We must protect those that remain and rebuild those that have been lost. Think big—like releasing enough water to sustain our precious estuaries. Unleash some water, and the wetlands with their marshes will magically reappear, unaired in any other way.