

REAPPEARANCE OF THE BLACK RAIL ON LONG ISLAND

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Since 1967, we have been studying *Ammospiza* sparrows in the Oak Beach marsh (Suffolk County), on the south side of Great South Bay. On the night of 29-30 March, Post was sleeping in the marsh. His tent was pitched in a patch of *Spartina patens* surrounded by a tall, extensive stand of *Phragmites communis*. Starting about midnight, he heard a cuckoo-like "who-who-who . . ." on the ground around the tent. The sound seemed to be coming from 6-8 meters away. This call kept up, at intervals, for several hours.

Believing this to be the call of a female Black Rail, (*Laterallus jamaicensis*), and knowing that this species bred at Oak Beach 30 years before, we decided to attempt to capture some Black Rails. We made a Low shorebird trap, modified to trap rails (Low, 1935; Adams and Quay, 1956). We made it from half-inch hardware cloth. We placed the trap in a patch of *S. patens* and ran two half-inch mesh leads, each about 15 meters, from either side. This trap was put into operation on 26 April 1968. On 4 May, we caught our first Black Rail, but this bird was captured in a mist net left open overnight. Our rail trap subsequently made four more captures.

TABLE I. BLACK RAILS BANDED AT OAK BEACH, NEW YORK

NUMBER	DATE	TIME	WEIGHT	R. WING CHORD	CULMEN
72-161044	4 May 68	0540	25.4 gm.*	72.0 mm.	14.0 mm.
72-161055	23 May	1940	36.3	72.5	15.2
72-161056	23 May	1940	32.4	72.1	15.2
72-161056 (Repeat)	17 June	1615	37.9	—	—
72-161064	20 June	1310	32.3	—	17.1

(* The weight on 4 May: the bird may have been in the net more than six hours).

The tarsus and toe color of these birds fits the description of Meanley and Stewart (1960): "Grayed-off blackish-brown." The bills were blackish-grey. The irides were brownish-red. (The latter two color descriptions are from the color chart in Palmer, 1962). We have color photographs of two Black Rails captured on 23 May. In the hand, the Black Rails were defensive, and they bit our fingers. One bird gave a distress call, a "who-who-who" resembling the call heard in March. This can be

taken as evidence that the cuckoo-like call is indeed produced by the Black Rail. (Ultimately, all references to this call can be traced to Wayne (1905). His description was republished in *Birds of South Carolina* (1910): "As soon as she entered the standing oats she began to call, which notes resemble the words, *croo-croo-croo-o*, and then again almost exactly like the commencement of the song of the Yellow-billed Cuckoo.")

From banding and observations, we estimate that there were at least three pairs of Black Rails resident in the Oak Beach marsh. The size of our study area was 10 hectares.

The marsh at Oak Beach is 90% *Spartina alterniflora*, growing 50–150 cm. high. The marsh is interspersed with shallow pools. It is of fairly recent origin, and has not been ditched. The *S. alterniflora* marsh is bordered on the south by a thick, 2–3 meter high, growth of *Phragmites*. This zone is 30–40 m. wide, the *Phragmites* being replaced on the south by a dense growth of *Rhus radicans* and *Myrica pensylvanica*. Here and there in the *Phragmites* are patches of *S. patens* and a little *Distichlis spicata*, probably remnants of the former dominants in this zone of the marsh, plants now being excluded by *Phragmites*. These patches are, at the most, 10 × 20 m. Black Rail activity seems to center around the patches, although the birds were found as far as 100 m. away from them, both in *S. alterniflora* and in *Phragmites*. One bird (or birds) was seen regularly in an area of sparse, flooded *Phragmites*.

Virginia Rails (*Rallus limcola*) were common breeding residents in the same area of the marsh, but they nested and fed in the wetter part of the marsh.

Besides the cuckoo-like call heard in March, what we believe to be the male Black Rail call was heard regularly. For example, on 9 May, there was a quarter-moon, a slight wind, and the temperature was 9 C. A rail was calling 15 m. away, from 2130 to 2150. The call was repeated every 4–5 seconds. This call can be described as "Kik-kik-Kerrrr," with the last syllable dropping in pitch. The call is described in Kellogg (1962). We disagree with Robbins' statement in that paper that the "Yellow Rail" call on the Kellogg-Peterson record (Kellogg, Allen and Peterson, 1959) is a Black Rail. (It is now known that the "Yellow Rail" call is a Virginia Rail—see Callin, 1968).

In connection with our *Ammospiza* study, we made extensive searches through the marsh for all bird nests. We never found Black Rail nests. However, patches of dense, almost impenetrable *Phragmites* may have held nests. The Black Rails were first found at Oak Beach in May 1937. At the same locality on 20 June 1937, Carleton found a nest with eight eggs. Since 1937, the environment at Oak Beach has changed radically. By the 1950's, *Phragmites* had become common (G. Carleton, personal communication). It has now replaced the "salt meadow" species such as

S. patens, which are considered the preferred cover for Black Rails. However, the Black Rail may be more resilient to environmental changes than is thought. Short grass marshes are usually considered optimal habitat, but the Black Rails at Oak Beach were ranging into pure stands of *Phragmites* and into the wetter, *S. alterniflora* zone of the marsh.

It should be mentioned that there have been no observations of summering Black Rails on L.I. since 1940 (Bull, 1964; T. Davis, personal communication), and this may be related to the ditching of marshes for mosquito control. Such a ditched marsh can be found, for example, in the Tobay (Kennedy) Sanctuary, 13 km. west of Oak Beach. Tobay has been worked intensively by ornithologists, and, although *S. patens* is much more common than at Oak Beach, Black Rails seem to be absent. We are suggesting that the better food supply of an unditched marsh may be an attraction for Black Rails, and that the species can adapt, within certain limits, to changes in the plant cover.

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