

NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS

Early Nesting of a Virginia Rail in New York: During the spring of 1987 I was studying the breeding birds in the tidal marshes of the Hudson River. On 7 May, Bryan Swift and I were performing standard censuses in Constitution Marsh, an extensive tidal wetland directly across from West Point. It consists mainly of emergent vegetation, primarily Narrow-leaved Cattail (*Typha angustifolia*) and Purple Loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*).

Our census techniques incorporated the use of recorded calls played back through hand-held tape players. During this census round we were using a 10-minute tape of Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*), Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*), and Sora (*Porzana carolina*) calls. I was standing at one of the census points playing the tape when I noted a very immediate and agitated response to the Virginia Rail "grunt" on the tape player. Unlike the grunt call that we normally heard from this species, or the less frequent "kid-ick", this call was sharp and piercing and was repeated many times over the course of the 10-minute census period. Kaufmann (*Wilson Bull.* 95:42-59, 1983) refers to this call as a "kiu." It is an alarm call used by nesting birds. As the calls seemed to come from a pair of birds, and as the two birds consistently called from the same general area, I decided to check that spot for a nest after the tape was over.

I was rewarded almost immediately by finding the nest and was quite shocked when two black, downy chicks scurried out of it, leaving two unhatched eggs. According to the life histories I have found pertaining to rails, the unfledged chicks in this nest were at least 15 days ahead of the previous earliest dates for New York State. Bull (*Birds of New York State*, Cornell Univ. Press, 1985, p. 218-19) and Meade ("*Breeding Season Tables*", February 1981) both cite 22 May as the earliest date for unfledged young. Using a 20-day incubation period (Meade, *op. cit.*), the most probable date for egg laying would have been 17 April, again a full 18 days ahead of the earliest egg dates. However, Burtch (*Bird Lore* 19:243-248; 1917) reports on a Virginia Rail nest in western New York with a hatching date of 11 May. There may have been more chicks in the nest than the two I saw, for most clutches are reported to be of at least six eggs. The two remaining eggs were very different in color, one being a buff blue with some speckling and the other being light tan with the same speckling pattern. At first we thought that another bird had parasitized the nest, but both eggs were later verified to be those of a Virginia Rail by Jim Rod of the National Audubon Society. On 11 May both eggs were still in the nest, and on closer inspection we found that the eggs had been pipped.

The nest itself was located on the crown of a tussock sedge (*Carex stricta*) approximately 30 cm above ground level. Nesting material was mainly bits of dead cattail leaves of varying length, and some pieces of dead sedge arranged to make a shallow depression on the top of the tussock. Above the nest adjacent leaves of dead cattail had been pulled across to make a loose canopy. The nest was located in an area of dense loosestrife and some woody vegetation of alder (*Alnus* spp.) and Swamp Rose (*Rosa palustris*). Arrow Arum (*Peltandra virginica*), jewelweed (*Impatiens capensis*), and Marsh Fern (*Thelypteris palustris*) were also conspicuous plants in the immediate vicinity of the nest.

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