

A CORN CRAKE (*Crex crex*) AT CEDAR BEACH, SUFFOLK COUNTY, LONG ISLAND

Ken Feustel

Belton Rd., Babylon, NY 11702

feustel@optonline.net

*Listen closely, fellow birders, and you will have our take
on the recent discovery of the elusive Corn Crane.*

(with apologies to William Wadsworth Longfellow)

A cold front had pushed into the Northeast prior to Election Day, 7 November 2017, and Sue and I had begun our birding (after voting, of course) at Robert Moses State Park, a short distance east of Cedar Beach. The birding was slow, with our only notable sighting being a late Magnolia Warbler. We decided to head west on the Ocean Parkway and bird at Jones Beach State Park, where we knew from experience that any south-facing shrub barrier may harbor late insectivorous species. Traveling on the Ocean Parkway during rush hour is not for the faint of heart, with traffic routinely moving at seventy-five miles per hour. We had learned through years of traversing this roadway that maintaining a minimum speed of sixty miles per hour was necessary to prevent being rear-ended. Long ago, we had developed the habit of checking the shoulder of the parkway for birds as we drove, and doubling back to check anything that looked interesting. As we approached the Cedar Beach marina KF noted a buffy-chested bird standing under a shrub on the north shoulder of the parkway. It looked intriguing, although we had no idea what it might be. Carefully making the turn to head east we were soon heading west again, approaching the location where the bird had been seen—and there it was, feeding right along the edge of the shrubline. Meanwhile, cars sped by only five feet away, shaking our car as they whizzed by. Sue and I both said “It’s a rail!”, which is curious, because, in many ways, this bird looked decidedly un-rail-like, more suggestive of a female quail or grouse.

About this time a Suffolk County police officer pulled up along side us and asked if we needed any help (the bird raced into the bushes). Sue smiled sweetly and told the officer that we had just managed to get our car started (!!!). The deception came so easily—who was this woman I thought I knew? Having told the officer our car was in working order we had to leave, making the same circuitous route as before. When we arrived back where the bird had been we quickly spied the bird actively feeding, apparently on earthworms. I was attempting to get photos of the bird, but was constantly shooting through my back window, and the photos were terrible. I carefully opened the door and

stepped outside, and the bird rocketed into the vegetation. For the third time we left and did our (now familiar) route. The bird again cooperated and returned to feeding on the grassy shoulder.

Sue and I had been through this drill previously, having on three occasions discovered Yellow Rail on the nearby Oak Beach Marsh during the Captree Christmas Bird Count. Naturally, we first concentrated on a possible Yellow Rail or immature Sora. Of immediate concern was the large size of the bird, which did not seem to fit either Yellow Rail or Sora. The patterning of the back feathering also seemed inconsistent with the two rails. I decided to take a flyer and asked Sue to look up Corn Crake in the Nat Geo field guide. The book had a tiny illustration of an adult Corn Crake—we were not convinced. During this time the bird had been feeding in relatively tall grass that hid its flanks. When the bird came out a little further we saw the burnt red coloring on the flanks. Sue and I looked at each other and said "uh-oh". At this point Sue smartly googled "juvenile Corn Crake" and once we saw the picture, we were convinced. We called Shai Mitra and Pat Lindsay to help with the identification, and we were lucky they were able to quickly come over and confirm our (tentative) determination that the bird was a Corn Crake.

After that we posted the observation to the Cornell listserv and the insanity began.

The End

