Black Rail: New to Ontario and Canada

by
Paul D. Pratt

14 June 1987. There I was, out prowling the back roads of Bentinck Township, Grey County after midnight, choosing direction at random as each intersection appeared. Anything to avoid the crowd back in Durham which had gathered for my grandmother's funeral. Clear, still nights like this are perfect for picking out the distant calls of herps so I decided to look for wet spots and record calling frogs for the Ontario Herpetofaunal Summary. At 20 minutes after midnight I stopped the car at an intersection which had a few marshy spots. Even before opening the car door I heard an odd distinctive call. My first thought was that I must be confusing the call of some familiar species. Is this really happening? Is this really a Black Rail? I knew there were no accepted records for this species (*Laterallus jamaicensis*) in Canada and that I was alone, without binoculars, boots, tape recorder or fellow birder. I nearly had a fit!

After locating the calling bird in a roadside ditch I returned to Durham to pick up Marg Catton and Terry Pratt. The rail was still calling persistently when we returned. The bird gave two (sometimes three) loud whistle-like calls on the same pitch followed by a gravelly, lower pitched "dew" (the typical "kick-ky-dew" call). This call was repeated every three to five seconds. Shining the flashlight often resulted in the abrupt cessation of calls for 5 minutes. Terry was satisfied with hearing the bird (oh, to be so blasé!) but Marg and I desperately wanted to see it.

I have used a technique which works very well for seeing Yellow Rails (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) (Pratt 1981) and reasoned it might also work with this species. After much walking back and forth along the road, Marg and I triangulated the bird's location, and slowly entered the ditch. We estimated that the bird was three times more distant than one would guess from listening at a single point. We were within 10 m of the bird when it stopped calling for several minutes. We waited very quietly until the bird resumed calling and cautiously approached another 5 m. The calls stopped and again we stood still (without using a flashlight and tolerating the mud easing up past our ankles). The calling resumed but our first attempt to spot the bird with the flashlight missed and we had to wait once more. We finally spotted the bird 3 to 5 m away in a small opening in the mat of dead cattails. The most obvious and striking features of the bird were its small size, smaller than a young Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) seen moments before, and the abundant white spots/flecks covering the upper body and flanks. The bird remained in full view for about 10 seconds before it slowly walked into the cattail mat.

We left at 0145 h, ecstatic but with serious thoughts concerning the disturbance a descending horde of people would have on the bird,

especially during the breeding season. I had only recently heard the story of a Black Rail in California which was trampled by birders, and reluctantly decided that this sighting could not go out on the hot-line.

I returned at mid-day to photograph the site. A truly nondescript, typical roadside ditch dominated by a heavy mat of last year's cattails, about 10 m wide, very shallow with tiny pools of open water. The adjacent, uncut, low pasture supported birds such as Bobolinks (*Dolichonyx oryzivorus*) and Upland Sandpipers (*Bartramia longicavda*).

Calling was now much more intermittent, with only six short calling periods between noon and 1406 h. The bird was moving east along the ditch bordering Hwy. 4 and over the period of observation, it travelled about 75 to 100 m. Despite several attempts to position myself ahead of the bird and at a point where the vegetation was fairly open, it always managed to get by without being observed. One brief period of calling was recorded with an inexpensive, borrowed tape recorder.

I returned to the site on 18 June and searched for the bird both at night and during the day without success. The pasture had been mowed and the ditch had dried up during the hot, dry period between visits.

The documentation for this record along with a duplicate of the audiotape has been deposited with the Royal Ontario Museum archives. Although this is the first confirmed record for Ontario (Curry 1991), this species has been reported on many past occasions (James 1991).

The earliest report of Black Rail for Ontario was a specimen taken near Ingersoll by Dr. T.J. Cottle in 1857 (Cottle 1859). Thomas McIlwraith (1894) in *The Birds of Ontario* stated "I have not seen the specimen, but ...I knew Dr. Cottle and feel sure that no mistake would be made in the identification". The record was also accepted by J.H. Fleming and included in the *Catalogue of Canadian Birds* (Macoun and Macoun 1909). Interestingly the rolling terrain about Ingersoll is very similar to the Grey County site. Suitable habitat in the form of small marshes and sedge meadows are numerous in both areas. Unfortunately the specimen was never examined by a competent authority.

The second report described four birds shot 18 August 1874 and mentioned several others seen later that year by C.W. Nash (1894) in the Dundas Marsh.

The third report was of a bird seen "at the mouth of the St. Clair" in June (year not specified) by W.E. Saunders (Macoun and Macoun 1909). Saunders did not include this species in his list of birds from western Ontario (Morden and Saunders 1882).

Black Rails have also been reported without documentation at Point Pelee National Park on 17 May 1958 (Axtell 1969), Rondeau Provincial Park on 24 May 1951 and 17 August 1985 (Baillie 1951; P.A. Woodliffe, pers. comm.), Erieau in 1921 (McKeough and Smith 1924) and Westover on 1 July 1959 (Speirs 1959). A report from Long Point on 10 June 1991 was accepted by the OBRC as the second confirmed Ontario record (Bain 1992).

The rarity and typically cryptic nature of the Black Rail make documentation of this species particularly difficult. This first accepted sighting of Black Rail for Ontario turned an otherwise sombre weekend into an extraordinary event.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Craig Campbell for historical information and Karen Cedar and Jo Barten for their many constructive comments.

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Publication Notice

Ontario Nest Records Scheme: Twenty-third Report (1956-1991). 1992. By *George K. Peck.* Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Ontario M5S 2C6. No charge.

This report summarizes nest record card data submitted over the previous breeding season (1991). It also tabulates the total number of nest record cards on file for each species known to nest in Ontario, and provides a breakdown by geographical area (county/district/regional municipality) of the number of species recorded on cards in this database.