

FINDING A BLACK RAIL

by Emmalee Bowers Tarry

What caught my eye was a notice that the next tides suitable for viewing the Black Rail at the Baylands Marsh in Palo Alto, California, would occur during the last week of December. On a cold evening in January, I was indulging in one of my favorite quiet pastimes—reading birding magazines and thinking about how to add to my life list. The little Black Rail had been a big hole in my list for some time. Of course, if you live in southern New Hampshire as I do, California is a long way to go for a bird, but not so far if your sister lives in San Francisco.

I consulted the tide tables for the San Francisco coast. A 7.4-foot tide, the highest tide in twenty-seven years, would occur in the morning on New Year's Eve in 1990—plenty of time to persuade my sister to have Christmas for our widely dispersed family at her house. My Black Rail search was on.

The Black Rail (*Lateralis jamaicensis*) is a small, secretive bird that prefers running to flying and is most active at night. Little wonder that it is one of the most wanted birds in North America. Although rails do migrate, flying mostly at night, there is a limited year-round population in the region surrounding the San Francisco Bay.

Christmas in California was great, and we had some good birding along the coast. On the morning of the big day, my daughter and I arrived at the Baylands Nature Center at 8:30 A.M. Since there were no other birders in sight, we did a little general birding in the area. There were Common Goldeneyes and Canvasbacks in the pond near the parking lot. We strolled out on the boardwalk and found Black-necked Stilt, Western Sandpiper, Snowy Egret, Great Blue Heron, Black-crowned Night-Heron, and Avocet. On the bay was a great raft of ducks including pintails, scaups, shovelers, and Ruddy Ducks. A Clapper Rail, a life bird for my daughter, browsed around and under the boardwalk. It appeared indifferent to us, but chased away another Clapper Rail that came poking along.

By 9:30 A.M. a small group of birders began to gather at the edge of the parking lot. We hurried to claim our spots. There is a walk out to the nature center, which is built on stilts in the marsh. Standing in the parking lot with the walk to your left, you will see two "No Parking" signs. Between these signs, the edge of the parking lot is bordered by large logs (telephone poles). In this area the vegetation is less than two feet high, providing a long vista of the refuge. This is the place to line up for the rail watch.

There is an informal agreement that you may stand on the logs, but not in front of them. This limits the line of spectators to one row unless one brings a stool or ladder to stand on to see over their heads. Having been forewarned of the problem, we were prepared with plastic milk crates, but our early arrival

insured that we got prime places on the logs. I had selected a spot with good visibility just opposite a small path of flattened grass that led straight into the marsh. The grass in front of us was filled with Song Sparrows. I had been advised that as the tide rose, the rails sometimes flew toward the parking lot, affording a good view. I followed every small dark bird that flew. They were all Song Sparrows.

The tide was rising, and the crowd had grown to sixty or more people. Late arrivals stood on our milk crates or tried to peer between the people in the tightly packed line of observers on the logs. A Sharp-tailed Sparrow, an unusual bird on the west coast, flitted from spot to spot. Every time it flew, someone down the line would yell, "There it is," breaking my concentration.

By eleven o'clock we could see the leading edge of the water inching toward the parking lot. The grass made soft popping noises as the water crept forward. We waited patiently, discussing birding equipment, birding trips, and rails. The people in the second row talked about bringing ladders and stools next time. For me, a next time might never come. I wanted to see this bird now.

Finally, the Sharp-tailed Sparrow perched high enough so that everyone had a good look. Then a Peregrine Falcon was spotted on the top of the power-line pylons in the distance.

Suddenly, from behind me someone said, "There it is." This time it was the rail, which had darted across the path from left to right. Darn! I was looking at another sparrow. Two large rabbits hopped through the water toward the crowd, stirring up a Sora Rail that flew a short distance. Another Clapper Rail waded close to the parking lot, and someone tried to make it into a Virginia Rail. A tiny mouse, caught by the high water, dog-paddled toward dry land. I concentrated on the path as the water crept to within six feet of the logs.

I spotted a small black animal darting from left to right about six inches above the water line. It disappeared into the grass without making any disturbance. It was virtually invisible except when it scurried across the open path. Was it a mouse or a bird? A few minutes later someone to my left spotted another bird approaching the path through the weeds. This time I clearly saw a small black bird with a chestnut nape dart across the path.

The area near the observation logs is optimal for viewing because the flood tide sends the water toward the dike, forcing the rails to move down a narrowing corridor between the parking lot and the rising tide. Since you stand on the logs looking down on the bird five to six feet in front of you, the chestnut nape is the most visible field mark.

The birds seemed to walk a few inches from the water line as if they wanted to keep their feet dry. Two more birds darted across the path. It was 11:20 A.M. The tide was cresting. Time passed, and the water began to recede. Was this it? My daughter had not seen the bird, and the only feature I had seen clearly was

the chestnut nape. I do not like to list a life bird unless I have really seen its features, and I wanted very much to share this experience with my daughter.

Then, it happened! A rail rose about five feet in front of us and flew about ten feet before dropping into the grass. Frozen in my mind is a picture of this small black bird with white spots, chestnut nape, small bill, short tail, and red eyes, flying with dragging feet. We had our Black Rail.

I think there may have been at least five Black Rails in the area, perhaps more. My daughter, a neophyte birder, is convinced that rails are easy to find.

The observation that the rails appeared to be avoiding the water is curious since rails can swim, and their normal habitat is in marshes or wet meadows. When the rail flew, it moved from a dry area to a place that was under several inches of water. The rabbits and the mouse caught by the high water illustrated that the very high tide caused a significant and rapid change in the depth of the water. I wondered about the impact of a flood tide during the nesting season.

I recommend that to see the rails at Baylands you bring a stool, stepladder, or box to stand on and arrive early. I was fortunate to have chosen a spot overlooking a small path that had been made by some animal walking through the grass, flattening it down. It is most important to be attentive and to persist. Do not give up the watch until the water has receded some distance from the parking lot. Telescopes are of no use. The bird was so close that I did not use my binoculars. The most important thing is to pay close attention. Many of the spectators had disappointing looks at the bird because they were talking or were otherwise distracted.

It is not always necessary to hit the very highest tide of the year. A Black Rail was seen earlier in the month on tides listed as 7.1 and 7.3 feet high and also two days before we were there, when the listed tide was 6.8-7.1 feet. I heard from people who had come there for several days that this was the second time in that week a Black Rail had flown.

Since the rail buggy at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge in Texas has been discontinued to protect the environment, Baylands is probably the only dependable place to see Black Rails without trampling the marsh or using tape recordings. While it is obvious that the birds are somewhat stressed by the high tide, I do not think that the large group of spectators added significantly to their problems. I think the crowd may even have provided some protection from predation by keeping the larger birds away from the concentration corridor. Several people claimed that herons and egrets "eat the rails like popcorn."

To reach the Baylands Marsh in Palo Alto, take the Embarcadero exit east from Highway 101. Follow the signs to the small airport, and continue on to the parking lot near the nature center. The center is closed on Mondays. The best strategy for seeing the bird is to plan several days at Baylands during the flood-tide period. If you are lucky and see the bird on the first try, you will have no

trouble finding other good places to bird in the area. Information on the tides in the area can be found in *Dot's Fishing Guide, San Francisco, California Coast and San Francisco Bay*, published by Elliott Sales Corporation, 2502 South 12th, Tacoma, WA 98405.

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