

# FIELD NOTES

## A Massachusetts Yellow Rail Experience

*Dan Furbish*

One morning while I was operating a huge hay-cutting rig on Massachusetts Audubon property at the Daniel Webster Wildlife Sanctuary (DWWS) in Marshfield, Massachusetts, I experienced something awesome.

DWWS manages its lower fields in a three-year rotation, cutting one-third of the fields each year to keep them free of woody vegetation, and to recycle nitrogen back into the soil for better grasses. This benefits many species of mammals, birds, and insects by providing thick cover for them.

November 1, 1999, was a beautiful morning. The sun was shining, it was reasonably warm, a dark-morph Rough-legged Hawk was flying overhead. We decided to mow on this day because the section to be cut was nearly dry. The fields down back have to be negotiated very carefully because if you're not on your toes, you could bury that mammoth rig in no time flat.

It was unbelievable: there I was, cranking along in a four-wheel-drive, diesel-powered tractor that makes a Geo Metro look like a pedal car, and the 15-foot phragmites beside the tractor towered over the cab by three feet. The dust was flying, the John Deere 5500 tooling along at 2400 rpm's, the 16-foot-wide John Deere Cut-conditioner churning behind the tractor. I had just cut about four acres of grasses one-and-a-half to two feet tall, and I was negotiating the rig between a slightly wet area and a ten-foot-square patch of grasses that was left to be cut. Suddenly, out popped a very small honey-colored RAIL, with white lines making a checkerboard effect on its back, and white patches on both wings!

It flew from left to right, in front of the tractor, with the machine still moving forward. I opened the door of the rig to get a perfect view of this bird in flight only five or six feet away. From that point on everything went in slow motion...in my mind I was shouting YELLOW RAIL! Then out loud I shouted YELLOW RAIL! Then I motioned "two thumbs up" when the rail touched the ground and disappeared — just like magic. I steered the machine well away from where the bird landed and finished mowing. I love my job! 🦶



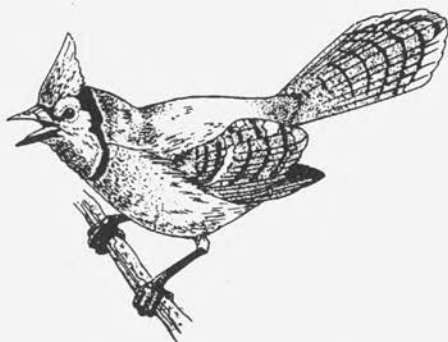
*Yellow Rail by David A. Sibley*

## Robber Blue Jay

*Susan Carlson and David Larson*

On a sunny day in February, we were walking with Marj Rines along a path near the edge of the woods at Dunback Meadows Conservation Area in Lexington when Susan noticed a Blue Jay (*Cyanocitta cristata*) swoop down into the underbrush about ten feet off to our left.

The jay immediately rose again, this time carrying a largish, light-colored object in its bill. It flew only a few feet, apparently having difficulty hauling its heavy load, and landed again, rather awkwardly. By this time we all had our binoculars on the bird. It was perched on a stick lying on the ground, with one foot on a limp, apparently dead mouse (*Peromyscus sp.*). Not more than 10 seconds after we got on the jay, which was hammering at the underside of the mouse, an adult Northern Shrike (*Lanius excubitor*) blasted into view from the right with a yell. In an instant, the jay abandoned its booty and fled. The shrike alit briefly, grabbed the mouse in its bill, and flew off into the underbrush. The Blue Jay looped and made one pass at the departing shrike, then perched and let the world know how tough it is to be a jay.



At the time, the three of us had the impression that the jay had found the shrike's food cache, and that the shrike was recovering its rightful property. Certainly, small rodents are a staple diet item for Northern Shrike in the winter, and a shrike makes a more convincing predator than a jay. However, in the *Lives of North American Birds* (Houghton-Mifflin, Boston, 1996), Kenn Kaufman notes that a minor part of the diet of the opportunistic Blue Jay is small rodents, so it is possible that we misinterpreted the scene.



On the other hand, Renee LaFontaine has seen on two separate occasions at Dunback what could be evidence of similar activity. Some weeks before the above incident, she caught a glimpse of a jay carrying what might have been a small rodent. Two weeks later in the same area, she saw a dead mouse propped up in a bush. These sightings, particularly the dead mouse in the bush, suggest that the Blue Jay was raiding the cached food of the Northern Shrike, and may have been doing so for some time.

Clearly, the moral is — if you are birding at Dunback, watch your lunch. ↗