

FIELD NOTES


Yellow Rail Sighting

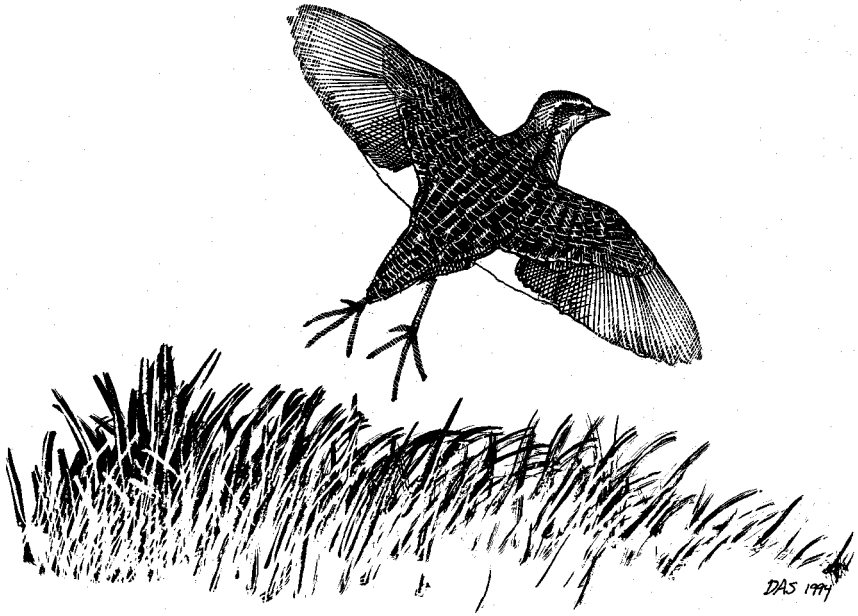
Ronnie Donovan

September 18, 2002, at 6:40 p.m. I observed a Yellow Rail in the Neponset Marsh in Dorchester. The sun was below the treetops, but the lighting was good, and the bird was seen in flight. I was standing still in the marsh, when from about twenty feet away the bird flew about twenty yards and disappeared. The blazing white wing patches were obvious. The “bright straw” color, small size, and bill were apparent. I’ve seen many Sora here, and some of them show a pale or buffy trailing edge to the wings, not to be confused with the bold bright pattern of the Yellow Rail’s wings. The bird is noticeably smaller too. Although I’ve seen Yellow Rail here before, it’s always a shock.

For what it’s worth, many field guides and books stress how difficult it is to flush these birds: “impossible,” “loathe to fly,” you need dogs, you need to drag a chain, use tapes, etc. This may be so, but I’ve been fortunate enough to have seen them behave in this manner before, when I have been slowly walking and occasionally stopping. Several seconds later the surprised rail flies. This is the third time I’ve seen one in this fashion. Three of us have seen Yellow Rail perched high on phragmites during a flood tide, and I’ve also found a partial carcass of this species in Neponset Marsh. I guess my point is that they are at least somewhat regular here and no doubt difficult, but never impossible to observe. I’ve also heard of one or two other sightings in this area over 15-17 years.

I find this behavior interesting because it seems contrary to most things I’ve read about Yellow Rails; in fact, I’ve never been able to observe one (confidently) on the ground! Virginia and Sora rails are regular here, so you can identify them at a glance. I should mention that I’ve walked through these marshes to get to the river hundreds of times (many autumns 30-40 times), so the chance of seeing a Yellow Rail is low. It is also important to mention that I (we) have never done anything to intentionally scare the birds up, or done anything unusual; no groups of birders in lines, no loud noises, tapes, dogs, chains – whatever. Usually I’m alone (not always). It’s a quiet, passive kind of birding. Dusk is the best time for all rails; there is also a 15-20 minute period where you can make out Virginia from Sora or hope to see the white patches on a Yellow Rail. You can’t flush them twice either, unless it’s a flood tide. These marshes are brackish with breeding Marsh Wrens and Salt Marsh Sharp-tailed Sparrows. We have been lucky to see other rare or unusual migrants here, such as Sedge Wrens, and LeConte’s and Henslow’s sparrows. In all the years, though, I’ve seen only one Least Bittern and one large (King) rail.

I hope whoever is reading this finds the experience interesting – or perhaps it’s not unusual at all. These observations are the result of many walks over many years, and they’ve made me think a little differently about the rails. 



YELLOW RAIL BY DAVID A. SIBLEY

“Bubble Feeding” Behavior of a Snowy Egret

Stephen Mirick

While scanning for shorebirds in Newburyport Harbor from behind the wastewater plant, Jane Lawrence and I noted an adult Snowy Egret exhibiting some interesting feeding behavior.

We observed an egret that had waded out into deeper water with the receding tide, and it remained perfectly motionless, but had its neck fully extended with a portion of its bill underwater. From the edge of its bill we saw splashing motions which seemed to indicate a struggling fish; however, it was soon apparent that these splashes were coming from the bird. It looked like the bird was blowing bubbles, but the splashes were actually from small rapid opening and closing movements of its bill. The posture was also reminiscent of a dabbling duck skimming the surface of the water for food.

The egret held this position for a long period of time before it lunged for a fish, then resumed the behavior. It continued “bubble feeding” over and over with several lunges while we watched it catch two minnows. We watched the bird exhibit this behavior for over fifteen minutes before we left it to continue our search for

shorebirds. I can only assume that the egret had somehow developed this specialized feeding behavior for perhaps attracting minnows to the splashes that were created by the bill. Ain't birds fascinating sometimes?

I digiscope-videotaped this behavior for a couple of minutes and include a still of the feeding posture and the reward! 🐦



IMAGES BY STEPHEN MIRICK

DRAGONFLY FIELD GUIDE PUBLISHED

A Field Guide to the Dragonflies and Damselflies of Massachusetts has just been published by MassWildlife's Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Program (NHESP). Authors are Blair Nikula, noted Cape Cod naturalist, and MassWildlife biologists with NHESP, Jennifer Loose and Matt Burne. The field guide is 200 pages with color photos of all male and most female adults of Massachusetts' 166 species, many of which are found throughout the Northeast. The guide also includes key characteristics, life-history information such as range, habitat, behavior and flight period diagrams, and is ring-bound for easy use in the field. This is the first field guide to cover all the dragonfly and damselfly species in the state, and as species ranges extend well beyond our state borders, it will be a useful tool for anyone interested in dragonflies in New England and beyond. Price is \$20.00 per copy, \$15 for orders of 25 or more. Check or money orders must be made out to the "Natural Heritage and Endangered Species Fund" and sent to: Dragonfly Field Guide, MassWildlife Field Headquarters, 1 Rabbit Hill Rd, Westborough, MA 01581. Phone and credit card orders cannot be accepted.



CALICO PENNANT BY DAVID LARSON