

## Rails in Pickaway County

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In 1889, Oliver Davie wrote in *Nests and Eggs of North American Birds* this of the yellow rail *Coturnicops noveboracensis*: "The small Yellow Crane appears to be quite rare everywhere in Eastern North America...Dr. Howard Jones has frequently taken it in the vicinity of Circleville, Ohio, and considers it nearly as common as other species, and believes it breeds there, which is probably the case throughout the State."

Jones (1853-1945), patriarch of the talented clan that produced *Illustrations of the Nests and Eggs of the Birds of Ohio*, was a Circleville physician with a passion for birds. He published half a dozen ornithological works, and was known as an authority on local history and archaeology. His papers are now in the Ohio Historical Society's archives. Jones's colleague Blenn Rife Bales (1876-1946) also worked as a physician in Circleville. Bales became known also for his archaeological collections, as well as his interest in natural history, which included local butterflies and moths, but especially birds. He published articles on local nesting birds in the *Auk* and the *Wilson Bulletin*, and upon his demise his collection of over 10 thousand egg specimens, including those of about 650 North American species and nearly all the known Ohio nesters, was donated to Ohio State University's Museum, along with related papers.

Jones recalled his boyhood rambles in the county by observing "one could walk half a day through the woods without coming to a clearing of any size," but by the turn of the century much clearing for agriculture had taken place, even though tracts of forest and wetlands remained. It was often after making professional visits around the countryside that he and Bales collected nests and eggs. Bales's taste was more acquisitive, and he managed a large professional collection of eggs, purchasing some (an ivory-billed woodpecker egg went for about a hundred dollars in the early twentieth century; he apparently did not own one) and trading with other enthusiasts.

The Bales egg collection, along with other large ones from Harold Price and Carl Tuttle, form the heart of OSU's collection, which ranks in numbers among the top two dozen in North America. The eggs themselves are accompanied by accession slips, catalogues, and journals from the collector, forming a unique source of information on Ohio birds. The personal journals preserved in the Museum collection chronicle among other things his discoveries of nesting birds in Pickaway County in the early years of the twentieth century. They show the author to have been a frequent and scrupulous observer of the natural world.

The first journal, a green school composition book with stamped page numbers, covers the years 1906 and 1907 in a clear hand and brown ink. Four old photographs, loose, are tucked inside. It reveals a county that has changed much since his time. At Calamus Pond (a few miles west of Circleville, now a Columbus Audubon property called Calamus Swamp) during 1907 for example, Bales records four June forays for least bittern nests, during which he collected 17 nests and 57

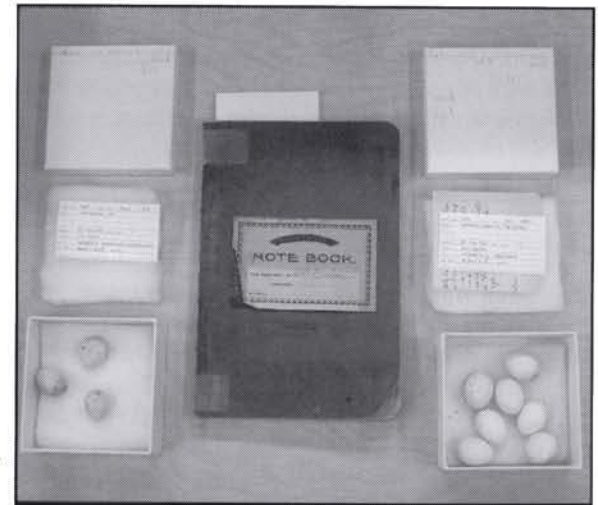
eggs, without apparent concern that he might have diminished their overall numbers there, nor did they in reports of years to come. From other wetlands in the county come numerous records of other bitterns, king rails, Virginia rails, and soras. All the common nighthawk eggs he mentions were collected on bare ground in cornfields, not on roofs. Of special interest was this entry on pp. 90-91, for 10 June 1907:

*Nest of Black Rail.* Nest sunk in a bunch of cattails 4 in above water and composed of cattail leaves and muddy trash, lined with pieces of smart weed stalks, a few pieces of morning glory vine, some timothy straw evidently taken from a pile of drift nearby and some short bits of cattail leaves. The nest was built near the end of a slough overgrown with cattails and water grasses and was situated near a clump of willows. Eggs 3 fresh, creamy buff, speckled and spotted with reddish brown and lavender gray. Markings more numerous at large ends of eggs.

These specimens were located in the OSU collection, in a box labeled "Coturnicops n. noveboracensis." This is of course the scientific name of the yellow rail. Inside, the three eggs, marked with AOU number 216 (black rail) and set number 4/3, are swathed in cotton, along with a catalog card that reads "#4068. Circleville, Ohio. 10 June 1907. 3 spec. B. R. Bales. Laterallus jamaicensis coturniculus. Bales 1, p. 186." The latter is the scientific name of the black rail.

The last citation is to an 8x12 ledger of 300 pages, with the handwritten title "Record of Bird Eggs Taken by B. R. and M. E. Bales 1907," one of a series of volumes forming a catalog of eggs in the Bales collection. The entry is headed by "AOU 216. Black Rail. Porzana Jamaicensis." The words "Black Rail," in ink, have been crossed out, and in pencil the words "Yellow Rail" inserted; the handwriting in both entries seems to be identical. The rest of the details follow the wording of the journal entry, except that measurements are added: ".99x.70/.97x70/.87x.64," and the nest's location is given in more detail, as "In a slough near a bunch of willow trees on Col. Anderson's farm 7 mi W [presumably of Circleville]."

The Anderson farm, according to local historians, was located along Lick Run, just north of where it crossed today's US Rte 22. The 1913 USGS map of the



In the center is Bales's notebook containing notes on the record. On the left are the yellow rail eggs he found in Pickaway County, later verified at the Smithsonian. On the right is a set of black rail eggs from New Jersey for comparison.



Era quadrangle shows a homestead 1/10 of a mile north of the highway, just 3/10 of a mile west of where the highway crosses the creek. A sign for "Seven Oaks Farm" marks the spot today. Just half a mile north of the homestead a smaller creek merges with Lick Run, and this wet area might well be the site of the collection of these eggs.

Evidently Bales, after measuring the eggs and consulting references and feeling unsure of his initial identification, sought expert advice, and eventually corrected the name in his catalog. The error, however, was perpetuated in the catalog card placed in the specimen box. The three eggs in question, when compared with black rail eggs in the collection, differed in being smaller, with a decidedly buff ground color rather than off-white. They represent the only known existing specimen evidence for Ohio nesting of the yellow rail.

This evidence is published here for the first time. Peterjohn (2001) writes that the "only nest was collected in Pickaway County in 1909 (Hicks 1935a)." The reference is to *Distribution of the Breeding Birds of Ohio*, where Hicks mentions a set of eggs collected near Circleville, Pickaway by B. R. Bales in 1909, citing *Wilson Bulletin* 26:196, 1914. Actually this article, by W.F. Henninger, provides correction to the existing bird list for Ohio by saying a set of eggs collected by Bales had been "identified in 1909 at the Smithsonian Institution. (Apologies due Dr. Bales)." It seems likely these specimens—collected in 1907 and later sent to USNM for identification—have at last been located, and serve to verify Dr. Jones's view of the status of the yellow rail in Pickaway County. They also correct the date of collection.

[A searchable electronic database of the OSU Museum's bird egg collection is currently being developed, and may well provide new specimen evidence of the Ohio breeding status of other species. It and the Museum's collection of bird skins—data from both of which will be available via databases soon to be available on the Web—may be consulted by members of the public conducting research by making an appointment with the curator, John Condit, at [condit1@osu.edu](mailto:condit1@osu.edu) or (614) 292-0543 weekday mornings.]

#### Acknowledgments

John Condit, curator of higher vertebrates at the Ohio State University Museum of Biological Diversity, provided access to its holdings and library resources for the preparation of this paper. Marcia Brehmer provided original research into Pickaway County locations involved in the record.

#### Bibliography

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## Recent Actions of the Ohio Bird Records Committee

by Tom Kemp, Secretary  
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The Ohio Bird Records Committee reviewed a total of 49 records in September and December 2007. Of these, 37 were accepted by the committee, 10 were not accepted, and two remain in circulation. Most of the records come from 2007, but some are from prior years. Remember, bird records can be submitted to the committee from previous seasons and even previous years. A complete and accurate record of Ohio's birdlife is what all in the state's birding community should strive for. To those of you who submitted records after mid-December 2007, they will be voted on in the next round, likely in late January or February. Finally, the OBRC welcomes Jay Stenger from Cincinnati as its newest member. Jay replaces Kevin Metcalf who resigned his position when he moved out of state.

#### Accepted Records

- Ross's goose *Chen rossii*; 10-12 Nov 2007; Paulding Co.; S. Myers, M. & D. Dunakin
- Cackling goose *Branta hutchinsii*; 18 March 2007; Auglaize Co.; R. Asamoto  
7 April 2007; Montgomery Co.; S. Egleston & R. Asamoto  
13 Nov 2007; Lake Co.; J. Pogacnik  
24 Nov 2007; Lucas Co.; J. Hammond  
25 Nov 2007; Wood Co.; T. Kemp
- Tricolored heron *Egretta tricolor*; 21 April 2007; Preble Co.; F. Frick  
8 July 2007; Erie Co.; C. Caldwell
- White ibis *Eudocimus albus*; 2 Sep 2007; Holmes Co.; S. Snyder
- Glossy ibis *Plegadis falcinellus*; 10 May 2007; Wayne Co.; S. Weaver  
18 May 2007; Greene Co.; F. Frick, L. Gara  
4 Sep 2007; Morgan Co.; N. Sudnick
- White-faced ibis *Plegadis chihi*; 10 May 2007; Wayne Co.; S. Weaver
- Swallow-tailed kite *Elanoides forficatus*; 6 July 2006; Mahoning Co.; B. Jones
- Mississippi kite *Ictinia mississippiensis*; 21 June 2007; Hocking Co.; B. Whan, m.obs. 19 Sep 2007; Vinton Co.; B. Crow
- Swainson's hawk *Buteo swainsoni*; 23 April 2007; Ashtabula Co.; E. Schlabach, S. Weaver 23 April 2007; Ashtabula Co.; E. & R. Schlabach, S. Weaver, L. Hochstetter
- Prairie falcon *Falco mexicanus*; 27 Nov 2007; Lucas Co.; D. Sparks-Jackson, M. Yawney
- Piping plover *Charadrius melodus*; 28 April 2007; Lucas Co.; S. Duris, m.obs.
- Black-necked stilt *Himantopus mexicanus*; 18 April 2007; Preble Co.; C. Hurley, D. Gross, m.obs.