

PHOTOGRAPHING WAYNE'S CLAPPER RAIL.

BY DONALD JOHN NICHOLSON.

(Plates XX-XXI.)

Wayne's Clapper Rail is numbered among the common salt-marsh species and is found along the entire Atlantic coast of the State in great numbers. It is not generally known by sight but rather by its vociferous notes, uttered in loud, noisy manner throughout the day. One bird starts and then a chorus is taken up by a score of birds one after another until the marshes resound with harsh notes.

Occasionally one is seen darting across the road to reach a chosen feeding ground or is caught skulking in an open muddy spot in the vast scattered patches of marsh grass in the network of sloughs, and it is extremely rare to catch one leaving its nest or even about the nest, especially if the eggs are fresh.

The plumage harmonizes so well with the gray-colored mud and dead grass that the bird is indeed difficult to see although it may be well within view. The wings when spread are of a dull reddish-brown hue, the middle back is of bluish-gray cast, and the belly barred with black. This is the impression I got when I had the opportunity to be within three feet of a pair that was very solicitous about the welfare of piped eggs, on June 13, 1926.

While at New Smyrna, which is in Volusia County, on May 28, I had the good fortune to find a nest of three eggs of this Rail, having been attracted by the uneasy calls of the birds, upon parking my car within twenty feet of the nest. They called so close to the nest that it was an easy matter to locate it, some ten feet from a road which was built across the marsh for three-quarters of mile. Not having a full set of the species I decided to return and collect them later. On June 13, I came back and found broken egg shells in the nest, the birds having destroyed the eggs. I say the Rails destroyed the eggs because I had several years before found a nest with three eggs in a well-concealed place that Crows could not possibly discover and the same thing happened.



Photos by D. J. Nicholson

WAYNE'S CLAPPER RAIL.

1. SETTLING ON THE EGGS.
2. RESENTING AN INTRUSION.



Photos by D. J. Nicholson

WAYNE'S CLAPPER RAIL.

1. NEST AND EGGS.
2. EGGS AND FRESHLY HATCHED YOUNG

It would appear therefore that the Rails are extremely suspicious birds.

Disappointed at the outcome, because I had anticipated photographing the bird on the nest, if possible, I retraced my steps to a distance of about three hundred feet, when my eyes focused upon a suspicious-looking bird-like object reposing on top of a bunch of marsh grass. Looking closer I finally made out the outline of a sitting Rail in plain view of the road and within twenty-two feet of it. Here was my chance at last. Carefully I walked to within eighteen feet of the bird and snapped a picture with my Graflex but no nest of the bird can be seen in the picture. Conceiving the idea that a closer approach could be made, I crept quietly and steadily towards the subject until I had gotten within six feet of her. She watched me intently never moving a feather, but at this distance she could not bear the suspense any longer, and rising slowly slid backward off the nest on the opposite side. As the grass interfered with my focus I did not attempt a picture and thought I had lost a chance of a lifetime. Before she left I could hear a little one in the nest cheeping and others in the grass close by, so I knew the reason for her courage. The nest contained two pipped eggs and one shiny, black, downy young, perfectly dry, and the moment she left the little one scrambled down the opposite side of the nest from where I stood. If I could not get her picture the best I could do was to photograph the nest and eggs. As I bent over to part the grass I got the surprise of my life, the old bird ran up the approach and onto the nest and gave me a vicious jab on the hand. She left the nest three times and returned to have her photograph taken on each occasion. Three times I put the young bird in the nest to get a pose and each time he ran away, until finally tiring of his efforts he lay quiet long enough to be photographed.

While this was going on the male was within three feet of me just under the nest, and when I wanted other different poses both birds were very obliging. Their notes to the young were low clicking sounds apparently made by snapping the bill, and twice the female made loud outcries within several feet of me, with raised wings and ruffled feathers. Once she tried to lead me off by crying loudly and flying a short distance and upon alighting went through demonstrations.

It is wonderful the bravery and courage a wild timid bird will display when the young are in danger, and this is an example in an especially secretive species.

Upon my return several hours later after all my plates were used I found her sitting contentedly upon her two eggs, and taking another look to see what progress they had made, I found them unchanged. In the intervening time I found four more nests in similar situations and all within fifty feet of the road. These were empty, and apparently fresh.

I could discern no difference in the plumage of the male and female, but the young was covered with a beautiful fluffy, shiny, coal black down, with mandibles of a light color. There were no signs of egg shells about the nest.

Orlando, Florida.