

## THE YELLOW RAIL BREEDING IN ONTARIO

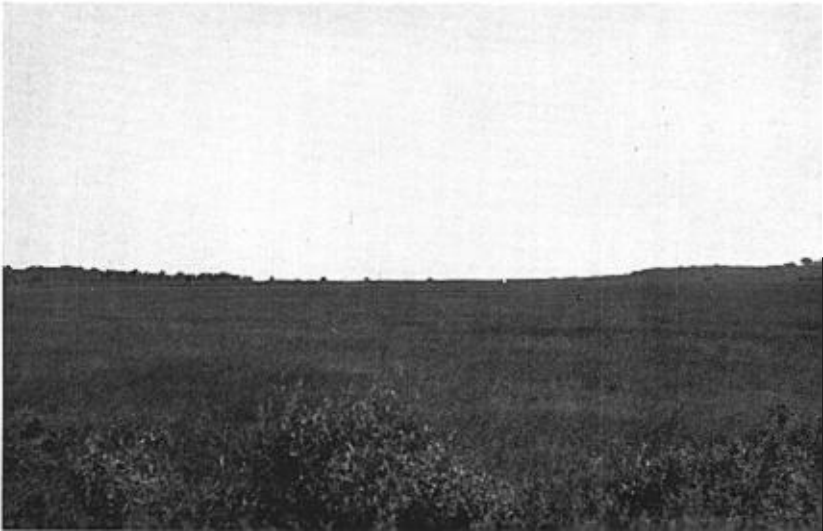
BY OTTO E. DEVITT

*Plate 10*

THE Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) has always been a rare bird in Ontario. Taverner (1934) says: "According to actual records, it is one of the rarest birds in Canada." Yet it is widely distributed in summer throughout Ontario and, although it can hardly be said to be plentiful anywhere, there seems to be evidence that it is much more abundant than is generally supposed. Its distribution extends north to Hudson's Bay. At Moose Factory, on James Bay, it is a common bird according to Sam Waller, for several years resident school-teacher at that post. A specimen secured there by Waller on June 2, 1930, is in the collection of the Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology (Baillie and Harrington, 1936).

It has been noted during the breeding season at widely separated localities in the province, from our southern border at Lake St. Clair (Swales, 1912) to James Bay, but no definite evidence of its having bred had been secured prior to 1938. Hutchins's account of a rail breeding near the efflux of the Severn River on Hudson's Bay about 1777 (as quoted by Macoun, 1909) wherein he states: "It builds no nest but lays from ten to sixteen perfectly white eggs among the grass" can hardly be referable to this species in the light of present knowledge. Similar doubt surrounds the statement by Sam Waller that D. Sailless, Indian at Moose Factory, claims to have once found a nest of this rail "containing many eggs."

There are a number of scattered records of the presence of Yellow Rails in migration in the southern part of Ontario. In the vicinity of Toronto, it has been recorded as "a regular fall migrant, rare" by Fleming (1906). A specimen was secured at Toronto Marsh as early as June, 1874, according to Scott (1885), and Fleming records one taken on August 5, 1896, and one taken April 24, 1899. All other occurrences at Toronto, until recently, have been in the fall between September 10 and October 15. The most recent records have come from the Holland River Marsh, some twenty-five miles north of Toronto. This extensive marsh stretches for about fifteen miles in a southwesterly direction from Cook's Bay, Lake Simcoe, and is about a mile across, at its widest point. The marsh was an arm of the former glacial Lake Algonquin. Poor drainage, due to the very slight difference in levels between the source and the mouth of Holland River, has given rise to marsh and bog conditions. Within the memory of some of the older inhabitants, parts of this marsh were covered with water to a depth of several feet. In 1925, much of the western section was drained and the land



HAUNTS OF YELLOW RAIL, HOLLAND RIVER MARSH, ONTARIO



NEST AND EGGS OF YELLOW RAIL

is now being utilized for market gardening; but there is still a considerable area in its original marsh condition.

The first indication that the Yellow Rail was to be found in this marsh came to hand on May 25, 1929, when one was flushed by a group composed of J. L. Baillie, R. J. Rutter and R. E. Bennett, near the top of the sixth concession of King township. The observers had been attracted to it by its repeated 'clickings' in the marsh in daylight (about 6 p. m.). Further occurrences of the Yellow Rail in the Holland Marsh were not reported until May 28, 1937, when R. D. Ussher, while carrying on faunal-survey work in the same general area, heard what he believed was a Yellow Rail. A series of sharp *tik* notes, repeated several times, was heard but a search failed to locate the bird. Returning with D. A. Ross on June 28, Ussher spent part of the night at this spot in an effort to ascertain the author of the sounds. With his kind permission, I quote in part from Ussher's notes. ". . . Back again to same area, in the evening, 9.30 p. m.-12.30, cool and damp. A little light still visible when we reached the plot. We were greeted, presumably, by two Yellow Rails. Their calls *kik-kik*, *kik-kik-kik*, sounded rather like a light hammer driving nails; sometimes it had almost an electric snap. We flushed one on the plot several times. Ross saw white on the wing but I was unable to make it out. We kept after it. The bird would flush and fly a short way, once or twice rising from my very feet. After alighting, it would commence its *kik-kik*, *kik-kik-kik* or occasionally *kik-kik*, *kik-kik*. Ross, imitating the note, had this bird come right up to his feet, answering with a series of low *brmm* or *glum* sounds each time, especially as it got close."

From this experience it seemed that the best time to hear and see Yellow Rails was at night. Accordingly, R. D. Ussher and the writer visited the same location on July 1, going in about sunset. After walking out several hundred yards into the open bog, which quakes as one passes over it, we imitated the call of the Yellow Rail by striking two metal objects together. Almost at once answering 'clickings' were heard from two different points in the marsh. We approached one of the hidden birds and again imitated the call. The rail answered only a few yards away. By walking quickly in the direction of the sound, we were able to flush it almost at our feet and with the aid of a powerful flashlight obtain a fair look at the fast-disappearing object. The white wing-patches, the small size, together with the very characteristic call left no doubt as to its identity. On July 7, Ussher and Ross heard at least three Yellow Rails 'clicking' at dusk on the north side of Holland River, in Simcoe County, about five miles northeast of the first location.

On July 10, F. H. Emery and the writer, equipped with rubber boots, flashlights and 'clicking-stones,' spent most of the night in the Holland

Marsh, a few miles north of the town of Bradford, in Simcoe County, and about a mile west-by-south of the point where the preceding observation was made. We succeeded in locating at least three Yellow Rails and viewed their flight in the beams of our flashlights. We found that they decoyed easily to any sound even faintly resembling their rhythmic 'clicking.' An instance of this came one night when we had just flushed a rail which we followed in the general direction of its flight. A short time later it was 'clicking' again. We approached cautiously, then stood still, meanwhile giving occasional imitations with the stones. The rail had stopped calling and after a considerable wait we decided it had gone. At my first step, I was surprised to have the bird flush almost at my heels. Apparently it had come up to us out of curiosity, in the darkness.

On the night of July 17, Emery and the writer again visited this section of the marsh. On this occasion we noticed that one particular rail seemed more excitable than usual and 'clicked' continuously. By approaching cautiously and swinging the beam of the flashlight back and forth, the writer succeeded in locating the rail crouched flat on its stomach but facing away from him. It was indeed an unusual sight to observe the object of our search uttering its 'kicker' calls. On July 27, the vigor of the night clicking had started to wane; only two rails were heard and these sounded rather feeble, lacking the snap of former occasions. On July 29, although we imitated the call for several hours, we failed to get a single responding note from the rails. Apparently the 'voice' period had ended with this species for the year. Although no evidence was secured, the continued presence of Yellow Rails in the Holland River Marsh during the summer of 1937 denoted probable breeding. With this thought in mind, it was decided to work toward the possible solution of the problem during 1938.

On April 17, 1938, soon after the snow had gone, the writer visited the marsh near Bradford and placed about twenty-five wisps of old cut marsh grass on slightly raised hummocks, near where we had encountered Yellow Rails the previous summer. It was hoped that one might be enticed to nest under one of them as recorded by Peabody (1922). This experiment was doomed to failure, however, for returning on June 3, with F. H. Emery, we found that the hay had been beaten down flat and, moreover, held no Yellow Rail's nest. Toward dusk our persistent 'clicking' was answered by at least three Yellow Rails. We had just flushed what we thought was a rail when an unusual thing happened. Emery was imitating the note, when a Yellow Rail flew up from the grass and attempted to cling to his coat pocket. Standing but a few feet away holding the flashlight, the writer could clearly see it as it fluttered there for a few seconds, then, failing to get a firm grip, it dropped back into the grass. In the beam of light we could see the tops of the grass moving and presently the rail could be seen as it

moved silently through the vegetation toward us, in the direction of the sound. It seemed to be torn between two urges: one, to advance, the other, a sense that danger was near and it should flee. Hence, its approach consisted of a series of short runs, first toward us and then a hasty retreat, to be followed by another approach. As it passed below the writer toward Emery, I dropped my hat over it and soon had it in my hand. Its only outcry was a short mouse-like squeak. It was quite gentle and made no attempt to bite. This bird was kept in captivity by Mr. Emery for nine days in an effort to learn something of its habits. It partook readily of earthworms, mealworms and freshwater snails. At no time during its captivity was it heard to make any sound. Although eating well, it died suddenly on June 12, without apparent cause. Subsequent dissection showed it to be a male. The specimen was presented to the Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology.

On June 12, R. D. Ussher and the author visited the marsh at midday and were proceeding across the section where we had recently captured the rail, when Ussher, who was a short distance to my left, flushed a Yellow Rail from the marsh, a few feet ahead of him. It flew off with a rather rapid, direct flight about three feet above the grass tops and dropped into the vegetation, about one hundred feet away. On searching the area around where the bird had risen, the writer was fortunate enough to locate the entirely concealed nest. Apparently the rail had flushed directly off the nest, a very unusual event according to Rev. P. B. Peabody, who in twenty years' experience with this bird had only had this happen once (Bent, 1926).

The nest, the first to be reported for Canada, contained a beautiful set of seven eggs. Six of them were rather uniform in color and pattern, being of a rich, creamy buff, heavily speckled around the large end with reddish-brown spots, in the form of a wreath. The seventh was marked differently, being minutely dotted with chocolate brown over the entire surface, slightly more concentrated at the large end. They measured: 29 x 20 mm.; 30 x 21; 29.5 x 20; 30 x 20; 30 x 20.2; 30.3 x 21; and 29 x 21, respectively. The eggs which were only slightly incubated and the nest are now in the Royal Ontario Museum of Zoology.

The nest was composed of fine blades of dead marsh grass, coiled in the form of a cup. It was built in the center of a dense clump of marsh grass which was fifteen inches in height; the bottom just rested on the ground and the rim about three inches up. The nest measured 3.75 inches across the top; the inside diameter 2.75 inches; the thickness was approximately one inch.

The surrounding vegetation contained much leaning dead grass, which formed a canopy over the nest, hiding it completely. The actual nest was found toward the drier outer edge of the marsh, some five hundred yards from the river. The ground surface at this point appeared to be without

standing water, but under foot pressure about one inch of water was visible. This area was covered with grasses and sedges, an occasional dwarf willow, and a number of other marsh plants. Typical plants in the immediate vicinity of the nest were marsh five-finger cinquefoil (*Potentilla palustris*), bog willow (*Salix pedicellaris*), blue marsh bellflower (*Campanula uliginosa*), cut-leaved water horehound (*Lycopus americanus*), marsh St. John's-wort (*Hypericum virginicum*), buckbean (*Menyanthes trifoliata*), a horsetail (*Equisetum*), the sedge (*Carex flava*), the grass (*Muhlenbergia mexicana*), and *Aster junceus*. This section of the marsh is the favorite habitat for such species of birds as the Short-billed Marsh Wren (*Cistothorus stellaris*), Leconte's Sparrow (*Passerherbulus caudacutus*), Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis* subsp.), Wilson's Snipe (*Capella delicata*) and Swamp Sparrow (*Melospiza georgiana*).

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#### SUMMARY

The Yellow Rail is widely distributed throughout the province of Ontario and its appearance during the summer months in favorable localities from Lake St. Clair to James Bay leads to the belief that it is a breeding bird, wherever suitable marshes are to be found.

While it is heard occasionally during the daytime, it becomes much more active just after sunset. The 'voice' period extends at least from May 25 to July 27.

It appears that a reasonably good imitation of the 'clicking' call will decoy the rail to the observer.

The nest, which was in a situation similar to those recorded from North Dakota by Peabody, contained seven eggs on June 12, 1938, and is the first reported from Canada.

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