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THE OCELLATED CRAKE (*MICROPYGIA SCHOMBURGKII*) OF CENTRAL BRAZIL

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The Ocellated Crake (*Micropygia schomburgkii*) is a small, sexually dimorphic rail, only 165 mm in total length and 40 g (males) or 24 g (females) in weight. Patchily distributed from Central America to South America east of the Andes in Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia and southeastern Brazil, it is sparsely collected and rarely seen. Little has been reported about its biology (summarized in Ripley, D., Rails of the World. Feheley Arts Co., Boston, 1977).

We present here some observations we have accumulated during the past four years on the behavior, vocalizations and nesting of this crake at the Reserva Biológica do Roncador, Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatistica, (approx. 15°55'S, 47°52'W), Federal District, in central Brazil.

At the study area, the Ocellated Crake inhabits dense dry grasslands, adjacent to palm groves or gallery forests, in which *Tristachya leiostachya* (Graminae) is the dominant species. These grasslands become wetter near palm groves or gallery forests found near streams. In the wettest portions, the ground is muddy, but there is no open water.

Five other rails occurred on the study area, but only the Russetcrowned Crake (*Laterallus viridis*) could be found in all habitats. Blackish Rails (*Rallus nigricans*) and Graynecked Wood Rails (*Eulabeornis cajaneus*) were found mainly in palm groves or forest. Although Horqueta Crakes (*Laterallus xenopterus*) could be seen occasionally in palm groves, we found them most often in wet grasslands, the preferred habitat of Whitenecked Crakes (*Porzana albicollis*). Unlike these species, the Ocellated Crake inhabits both wet and dry grasslands.

Ocellated Crakes are difficult to watch because they move through dense vegetation, frequently using the tunnels opened by rats and other rodents such as *Cavia* sp. Like rails, Ocellated Crakes appear to show excitement by movements of the erectile tail. They can burst into flight underfoot, flying close to the vegetation for a few meters and dropping into the grass. Their most frequent evasive tactic, however, is to run through the vegetation. The birds occasionally fly into lighted open windows at night.

These crakes forage by pecking on the ground, in the low scrub, or occasionally, in the open. Their diet includes beetles (Carabidae, Scarabaeidae), stoneflies, grasshoppers (Acrididoidea), cockroaches and many ants.

In this area, Ocellated Crakes breed from October through March. A nonmolting pair collected in October had gonads starting development (male: 7 and 5 mm; female: 8 mm). Although we never observed copulation, we frequently heard vocalizations at this time. One distinctive call, "prrrxxxzzz," sounds like oil sizzling in a frying pan and seems to function as an alarm call. Although uttered by both sexes, the males have a more elaborate and audible sequence: "prrrxxxzzz . . . crrraaauuu . . . crrraaauuu . . . ," uttered as the bird stands upright with tail vertical.

On 15 March 1979, we found a pair nesting in the dense wet grassland near a palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*) grove. Completely concealed in the vegetation 50 cm above the ground, the nest was oriented upwards, forming an angle of 45°, perhaps to facilitate evaporation. When we discovered the nest, the female was incubating, but immediately noticed our approach and ran off uttering the alarm call. The nest, built wholly of dry grass, was of a laterally compressed spherical shape, 200 × 140 × 170 mm, and resembled the nests of some *Laterallus*. A large entrance (80 × 45 mm) led to an egg chamber (110 × 70 × 90 mm) without any special covering. Female feathers were discovered under the clutch, mixed into the thick nest wall. The nest contained two dull white eggs with thin and plain shells, 24.6 × 19.3 mm in size.

Ocellated Crakes seem to be difficult to locate rather than scarce. At least in our study area, they are rather common, although easier to hear than see. The Parecis Indians capture many of these birds (called "maxalaga") for food by setting fire to the grasslands (Rondon, C. M. S., Historia natural, Etnografia. Conselho de Proteção aos Indios, Rio de Janeiro, 1947). Birds that we observed leaving burning areas appeared so dizzy and intoxicated by the smoke that we could capture them bare-handed. At such times Aplomado Falcons (*Falco femoralis*), which frequently hurry to grass fires, often prey on these crakes.

Ripley (1977) included *Micropygia* and other small quail-like rails in *Coturnicops*, based on similarities in their shape, habitat and nesting. There are, however, significant differences between *Micropygia* and the single representative of *Coturnicops* in South America, the little-known Speckled Crake (*C. notata*). The vocalizations of both species are distinct in pattern, that of *Micropygia* being similar to the sequences of some species of *Laterallus*. Also, the domed nest of *Micropygia* resembles the constructions of *L. melanophaius* and *L. viridis*, while differing from the more open nest of *Coturnicops*.

Finally, *Micropygia* differs from *Coturnicops* (sensu stricto) in certain anatomical details: the non-perforate nostrils and the extremely soft remiges; these features also reflect the bird's terrestrial habits. Among South American species of crakes, it seems reasonable to suppose that *Laterallus*, *Micropygia*, and *Coturnicops* are closely related, but so little is known about their anatomy and biology that the relationships between them are still uncertain.

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