

“Ornithological Mystery Story” revisited— the plot thickens.

by Stephen F. Bailey

ONE OF THE MOST PERSISTENT and intriguing controversies of North American ornithology concerns the identity of the “kicker,” the bird responsible for the mystery “song” first described by Brewster (1901). The song has been paraphrased by most observers as “kik-kik-kik, ki-queeah” (following Brewster) or as “tic-tic-tic-McGreer” (Kellogg, 1962). Although the song varies somewhat both within and between individuals, the song is quite distinctive. Most of the variation is in the number and spacing of the kiks. This song seems to be rare, but it is usually given quite persistently when performed. This vocalization is reproduced on the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology’s Peterson Field Guide records (1959, 1962), where it is attributed to the Yellow Rail, *Coturnicops noveboracensis*, albeit with a qualification in the Western Guide.

The “chapters” of Brewster’s “ornithological mystery story” have been summarized most recently by Bollinger and Bowes (1973). A review of the salient points is in order, however. Brewster (1901) believed that the Black Rail, *Laterallus jamaicensis*, was the “kicker.” Ames (1902) promptly “solved” the mystery by reporting that a Yellow Rail he had had in captivity during one autumn gave the mystery song whenever it was disturbed. Although not all ornithologists were convinced that the Yellow Rail and not the Black Rail was in fact the “kicker,” the “kicker” was identified as the Yellow Rail in Bent’s Life Histories (1926, p. 322) and on the Peterson Field Guide records. Kellogg (1962) willingly admitted the uncertainty of this identification, but he published audiospectrograms showing little resemblance between the mystery song and calls known to be typical of the Black Rail. More recently, the mystery has been “re-solved” by Reynard and Harty (1968) and by Bollinger and Bowes (1973), who independently demonstrated that the mystery song is given by the Virginia Rail, *Rallus limicola*. The rail heard by Reynard and Harty (1968) was a male.

Although ornithologists were unable to agree on its identity, until Bollinger and Bowes (*op cit.*) the assumption that only one species of rail was involved seemed universal. Bollinger and Bowes very perceptively suggested that the mystery song might be given by *more than one* species. They pointed out that the Yellow Rail, Black Rail, and/or any other rail, as well as the Virginia Rail, might give the mystery song. The song may be given regularly or only occasionally, but in any case it is relatively rare. Reynard and Harty (*op. cit.*) also emphasized the rarity of the mystery song, especially in comparison with the Virginia Rail itself, which is common and widespread. Both of these papers suggest that the conditions eliciting the mystery song are very specific.

AGAINST THIS BACKGROUND, the following account, adapted from notes recorded immediately after my observations, clearly represents a “thickening of the plot” of the “ornithological mystery story.” On June 13, 1976, I visited the Bay Bridge Toll Plaza, Oakland, California, shortly after dawn. From 06:15 to 06:35 I heard a bird persistently giving various forms of the mystery song. The songs were repeated several times per minute with few interruptions during the twenty minute period. Although the quality (timbre) of the song was not *identical* with that of the song on the Peterson Field Guide records, the pattern was so distinctive and the overall effect so similar that I immediately recognized the song as that of the “kicker.” The shortest variant of the song I paraphrased as “tic-tic-tic-McGreer,” identical in pattern to the record song. The longest variant was “tic — tic — tic-tic-tic-tic-tic-tic-tictictic-McGreeer,” including about twelve tics in an accelerating series plus an extended “McGreer.” The caller was hidden in an area of *Spartina* and *Salicornia* about 20 m north of the frontage road and 30–40 m east of the gun club causeway. About 30 seconds after the bird ceased singing, a California

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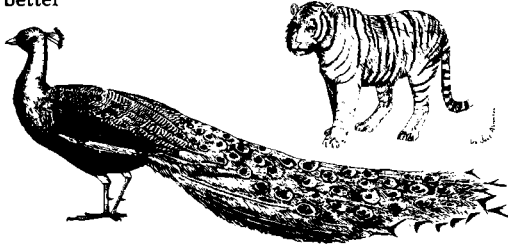
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Clapper Rail, *Rallus longirostris obsoletus*, walked out of the vegetation from which the songs had come, cautiously crossed 8–10 m of open mud, and disappeared into more *Salicornia*. No rail vocalizations were heard in the next ten minutes. I had an unobstructed view from 12–15 m. I was using 12 × 50 binoculars, and the light conditions were excellent, so I am sure of the identification. Clapper Rails often cross open mud in this area.

At 14:30 the same day I returned to the site of the morning's observation. I again heard the "tic-tic-tic-McGreer" song, this time only briefly and interspersed with more typical vocalizations of the California Clapper Rail. All calls seemed to come from the same area.

SHORT OF ACTUALLY *seeing* the bird produce the song, the evidence could hardly be stronger that the California Clapper Rail did sing the mystery song. If the sighting of the rail so closely linked to the termination of almost uninterrupted singing were not completely convincing, then the afternoon observation of the mystery song interspersed with typical California Clapper Rail calls should eliminate remaining reasonable doubt. Furthermore, the California Clapper Rail is a common permanent resident at the Bay Bridge Toll Plaza and is the only species of rail which should occur there in June.

This discovery that the Clapper Rail also gives the mystery song substantiates the suggestion of Bollinger and Bowes (1973) that several species may be involved. To my knowledge, this is also the first report of the "kicker" song from western North America.

THE MYSTERY SONG of Ames' Yellow Rail can no longer be dismissed as a freak of captivity. The evidence now suggests that at least four species—Virginia, (California) Clapper, Yellow, and Black Rails—may sing the mystery song. If this is the case, then the mystery song is a remarkably universal vocalization of rails, involving at least three genera. Perhaps most or all species of rails give the mystery song under specific and rare social conditions. A vocalization so universal would be expected in non-North American rails as well. Examination of *The Handbook of British Birds* (Witherby, H.F., et al., 1941) reveals nothing more suggestive than descrip-

tions of *common* calls of the Little Crake, *Porzana parva*, which vaguely resemble those of the mystery song. The Virginia Rail, King Rail, and Sora, *Porzana carolina*, all have a common call composed of a descending series of notes, and the various races of Clapper Rail have modifications of this type of call. Of course, the interspecific differences in this type of call are much greater than those observed and hypothesized for the mystery song, but this would be expected in such common calls. A very rare but nearly universal call might show relatively little interspecific differentiation. As noted above, the quality (timbre) of the song I heard differed somewhat from that of the mystery song on my Peterson Field Guide records. Whether this difference represents slight interspecific variation, distortion due to an old recording, and/or my imperfect memory, I cannot say, but such slight differences are certainly not unexpected.

With the exception of Ames' captive, the mystery song has been reported only during May and June. Thus, it is probably related to some aspect of reproduction. The rare and irregular occurrence of this "song" in contrast to the normally quite regular occurrence of each of these rail species on its favored nesting grounds seems to indicate that the social environment eliciting its performance is not only rare but is perhaps not even an annual event. A number of birders, myself included, have played taped mystery songs both day and night at a wide variety of fresh and salt water marshes and to all species of North American rails. To my knowledge, no one has ever elicited a response unless a rail was already performing the mystery song. This is in marked contrast to the often immediate response given to recorded versions of the more species-typical calls of these rails. This is further evidence that the social conditions appropriate for this song are very specific. It also is a major reason why the "ornithological mystery" is not yet completely solved.

Anecdotes suggest that some disturbances may create the necessary social conditions or elicit the song directly. Ames' (1902) captive Yellow Rail gave the song in response to disturbances. In salt marshes the complete flooding due to the highest tides, though regular, is a very disturbing event for the



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rails. The tide during the night before my observation reached a very high level of 6.8 ft. Tides of such amplitude occur only a few days per month from May through early July and from November through January. The latter period is not during the reproductive season for these rails. Observers of the "kicker" in salt marshes might look for a correlation between the mystery song and high-amplitude tides.

I suspect that alert birders and ornithologists will discover the "kicker" in additional types of marshes and perhaps demonstrate that additional species of rails give the mystery song. In any case, we may confidently await the next chapters of the "ornithological mystery story."

I am pleased to acknowledge Mercedes Foster's constructive criticism on an earlier draft.

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Black-capped Petrel in the George's Bank area

by Kurt Lambert

On Mar. 23, 1977 I saw a Black-capped Petrel, *Pterodroma hasitata*, near the south-eastern slope of the George's Bank, position 40°58'N 66°35'W. The bird followed the ship for approximately 20 minutes and sometimes approached very close to the ship. I was able to identify it by its white neck, forehead, and rump and by its special way of flight compared to *Puffinus gravis*.

The unexpected date of this record is

remarkable. Undoubtedly the bird had been drifted northeastward by a strong low pressure area that brought hurricanelike gales moving to the NE during the days prior to the sighting. On Mar. 23 in the George's Bank area the wind came from the SW with a strength of 8 to 9 Beaufort.

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