

The “kicker” song – new synthesis of an old mystery

The supposed rarity of this song, and its function, remain as subjects of controversy.

Tim Manolis

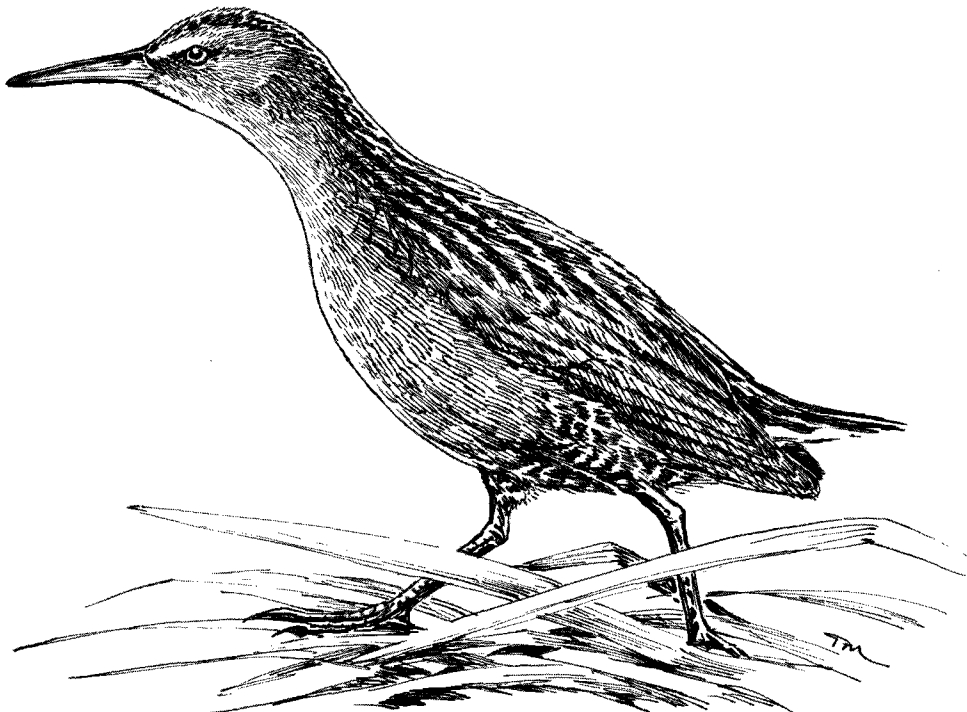
SLOWLY BUT SURELY, what began as an “ornithological mystery” (Brewster 1901) has evolved into a fascinating tale. It is a tribute to the mysterious ways of its perpetrators that they remained so long unidentified. But whereas their identities seem safely established, their motives remain unclear. Hopefully this paper will shed further light on these matters.

To briefly recapitulate, Brewster (1901) heard the “song” of an unidentified marsh bird that sounded to him like “kik-kik-kik-ki-queeah.” He tentatively guessed that the singer might be the Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*), but shortly thereafter, Ames (1902) claimed

to have heard the song from a Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*), held in captivity. Kellogg (1962) rediscovered the “kicker,” which he paraphrased as “tic-tic-tic-McGreer,” and obtained a recording of it. The mystery was subsequently solved, and the singer of the song recorded by Kellogg was identified as the Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) (Reynard and Harty 1968, Callin 1968, Bollinger and Bowes 1973).

Most recently, Bailey (1977) observed that the Clapper Rail (*Rallus longirostris*) has a song very similar in form to that of the “kicker.” While conducting a survey of Black Rails in the San Francisco Bay area of California for the Cali-

fornia Department of Fish and Game, I independently made the same discovery. However, I soon found that neither Bailey nor I had really discovered anything new at all. It seems that these calls of the Clapper Rail have been variously described as “kek(-kek-kek)-burr” (Tomlinson and Todd 1973) or “kek(-kek-kek)-hurrah” (Smith 1974). Smith discerned what he termed “kek-burr” and “kek-hurrah” calls, but indicated that they differed only in pitch and volume. A nearly identical call, “kik-kik(-kik)-kurr” (Meanley 1969) is given by the King Rail (*Rallus elegans*). Even Kellogg was aware of this call, which he likened to the phrase “hip-hip-hurrah” (record



Virginia Rail (Rallus limicola). Drawing by Tim Manolis

in Wetmore *et al.*, 1965), but it remained for Bailey to point out the similarity between it and the elusive “kicker.”

WHAT ABOUT OTHER North American rails producing this song? All evidence linking it to the Black Rail is purely circumstantial, and no known vocalization in the repertoire of the species resembles the “kicker” (Manolis and Rodgers MS). The only observation of a “kicker” song given by a Yellow Rail is that of Ames (1902), and this might justifiably be questioned for a number of reasons. Brewster (in McKechnie 1906) thought that the vocalizations of Ames’ Yellow Rail were probably not the “kicker”; he felt that the “kicker” was the breeding season “love” song of its singer, whereas Ames’ rail was an autumn captive, and vocalized only when alarmed. Ames had only Brewster’s written description to compare with his Yellow Rail’s calls, and no supportive evidence has ever emerged for his claim. Stalheim (1975) kept and bred Yellow Rails in captivity, yet he apparently never heard the “kicker” from any of his birds at any season. It is probably wise to treat all identifications of the “kicker” prior to the tape-recording of the song as hypothetical. For example, it could reasonably be argued that Brewster’s original bird was a King Rail, as the “hip-hip-hurrah” song of that species fits the details of his description as well, if not better, than the Virginia’s version of the “kicker.”

Can a “kicker”-like song be ascribed to any other species of rail? I think it can, to the Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus*) of Eurasia. Spectrograms of the “Balz-ruf” (mate-attracting call) of this species, paraphrased as “tjick-tjick-tjick-tjuirr” (Glutz von Blotzheim *et al.*, 1973), strongly resemble spectrograms of the Virginia Rail’s version of the “kicker” (Kellogg 1962, Reynard 1974). A discussion of the “song” of the Water Rail in Bannerman (1963) is particularly interesting in light of the North American history of the “kicker”:

“Professor M.F.M. Meiklejohn and Mr A.R. Jenkins have recently described the so-called ‘song of the Water-rail’ . . . as beginning regularly at sundown and continuing without intermission for a considerable time—perhaps even all night:

‘It consisted of a series of ticks—usually three, sometimes more—followed by a thin, agonized, wheezy scream, often declining in pitch at the end. It could be rendered as *tic-tic-tic-whee-oo.*’

The call, described above, as the writers point out, may be in the nature of a song which is only uttered by the birds for a short period in the breeding season. Thus it is relatively unknown, more particularly as it is to be heard at night, though not, it seems, exclusively so. It does not conform with the description of the Water-rail’s notes as usually expressed in the literature.” (pp. 216-217).

Thus, a “kicker” song seems to be documented, by tape-recordings and/or spectrograms, for Virginia, King, Clapper and Water rails, all within the genus *Rallus*. However, the supposed rarity of this song, and its function, remain as subjects of controversy.

Just how rare is the “kicker” song? Recent reports of Virginia Rails giving the song, summarized in Callin (1968) and Reynard (1974), suggest it is not as rare, at least in some localities, as earlier accounts would have us believe. Given the amount of avian noise that a marsh can produce at twilight and during evenings in spring and summer (not to mention the non-avian noise), a song like the “kicker” might easily go undetected unless the listener knew what to listen for and was expecting to hear it.

The function of the “kicker” seems to be related to the breeding cycle. Except for Ames’ Yellow Rail, all reports of the “kicker” are from February to August (Glutz von Blotzheim *et al.*, 1973, Bailey 1977). Tomlinson and Todd (1973) stated that “From late June to October, [tapes of] the ‘clatter’ and ‘kek-burr’ calls were definitely superior to the ‘kek’ call in achieving results [*i.e.*, responses],” but they did not specify what kinds of calls they elicited in that period. All the definite evidence so far indicates that only males sing the “kicker.” The only captured “kicker” singer (Reynard and Harty 1968) proved to be a ♂ Virginia Rail, and Meanley (1969) described the “kik-kik-kurr” of the King Rail as “presumably agonistic, heard when two ♂ King Rails were in the same territory.” Evidence relating this song to breeding season territoriality is found in reports on the behavior of Virginia Rails singing it (Callin 1968, Reynard and Harty 1968, Bollinger and Bowes 1973). Tomlinson and Todd (1973) and Smith (1974) guessed that probably both female and male Clapper Rails use “kek-burr” and “kek-hurrah” calls; yet, at the same time, Tomlinson and Todd agreed with Meanley’s interpretation of the probable function of the song in King and Clapper rails.

BAILEY (1977) suggested that rare and special environmental factors might trigger the “kicker” song. Specifically, he felt that the “stress” of high spring tides might stimulate Clapper Rails to sing this song. A summary of my encounters with the “kek-hurrah” call of Clapper Rails during the spring and summer of 1977 (Table 1) does not appear to support Bailey’s hypothesis entirely. It does, however, indicate that the complete inundation of a marsh by a high tide (*e.g.*, June 1) may temporarily obliterate territorial boundaries and displace birds, hence increasing the number of territorial encounters. On April 9 and May 10 it is conceivable that showers may have precipitated singing, but the “kek-hurrahs” heard April 27 seemed unrelated to unusual environmental factors. Kent Fickett (*pers. comm.*) elicited typical Virginia Rail “grunt” calls and “tic-tic-tic-McGreers” from what was almost surely a Virginia Rail in a small, freshwater marsh in Brisbane, San Mateo County, California, at approximately 8:30 a.m. April 29, 1977. The bird called following the playing of taped Virginia Rail “grunt” calls, although Fickett had also been playing a number of other calls of different rail species, including “tic-tic-tic-McGreers” (tapes made from *A Field Guide to Western Song Birds*, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, Ithaca, New York, 1962). No apparent meteorological or other external factors (except, of course, the taped calls) seemed responsible for these vocalizations.

In summary, there remains much to be learned about the “kicker” song. It appears to be an important, widespread spring song of territorial males in the genus *Rallus*, but that it is often heard in some localities and/or years but very rarely in others (Glutz von Blotzheim *et al.*, 1973, Smith 1974), and that its use may be related to environmental stress, indicate the need to further investigate the environmental and population factors that might influence its use.

One annoying stickler persists in the “ornithological mystery.” Just what was the nature of those vocalizations emitted by Ames’ pet Yellow Rail as it sat in its cage on a kitchen floor in Toronto? If it did not give the “kicker,” what, perhaps similar call, did it give? It might be noted that among the effects eliciting the response from Ames’ bird were the swishings, against the cage, of the skirts of the female members of the Ames family as they worked in the kit-

Table 1. Summary of weather and tide conditions during encounters with Clapper Rails giving “kek-hurrah” song in San Francisco Bay salt marshes, Spring 1977.

Location	Type of Response	Date	Time	Weather	Nearest High Tide ¹
Palo Alto Baylands Interpretive Center, Santa Clara County	50% “clatter”, 50% “kek-hurrahs”; all calling followed (in response to?) taped Black Rail calls (no Black Rails responded); about 10 Clappers involved.	April 9	0625-0806	Clear, 10-15 mph. winds, 40-50°F; rain during preceding night.	5.5 ft. at 0430.
Fly Bay, Napa County	A few spontaneous “kek-hurrahs” from 1-2 birds; many “kek-hurrahs” and a few “clatters” thereafter, from 2-3 birds.	April 27	1845-2000	Clear, 10-15 mph. winds, cool; sunset at 1950	4.7 ft. at approximately 2230.
Dumbarton Point, Alameda County	70% “kek-hurrahs”, 30% “clatter”; from 10-15 birds; seemed to respond to taped Black Rail calls.	May 10	1015-1145	Partly cloudy, just following brief showers; wind 0-2 mph., 58-60°F.	4.5 ft. at approximately 0650.
Dumbarton Point, Alameda County	Continuous calling, spontaneous; mostly “kek-hurrahs”, some “clatter”; many birds.	June 1	2400-0130	Clear, mild, hardly any wind.	6.6 ft. at approximately 2430 (virtually entire marsh under water)

¹Tide heights and times from U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey Tables. Time of high tide is corrected for each site.

chen, and sudden ignition of the kitchen gaslight in the middle of the night. If any such effects can be shown to elicit calls from captive Yellow Rails that, when recorded and analyzed, prove to be the “kicker,” the whole mystery will be once again blown wide open, and Chandler Robbins, who felt that the Black Rail gave the “kicker,” will be obliged to live up to his word (in Kellogg 1962) and “eat [the poor rail] raw”!

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