

## Colombian Crake (*Neocrex columbianus*) and Paint-billed Crake (*N. erythroptus*): first breeding records for Central America

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THE GENUS *Neocrex* consists of two small rails, both of which had been known to breed in northern Colombia. While occasionally included in other genera, or considered conspecific, Ridgely (1976) and the A.O.U. (1983) split the two forms into species, maintaining the genus *Neocrex*, following Olson (1973). The Colombian Crake, *N. columbianus*, may be differentiated from the similar Paint-billed Crake, *N. erythroptus*, by its pale cinnamon flanks and under tail coverts, these areas being barred with black and white in *erythroptus*; and by *columbianus* possessing a narrower nostril. Additionally, the underwing coverts are white in *columbianus* and often barred with black in *erythroptus* (Ripley 1977). The Colombian Crake was included in the avifauna of Central America on the basis of a single bird collected from a small marsh on Achiotte Road, western Colon province, Panama, November 8, 1965 by Henry Van Horn (Ridgely 1976). Wetmore (1967) described that specimen as the race *N. c. ripleyi*, which, based on it and an additional individual collected at Acandi, northern Choco, is known to range only from central Panama to extreme northwestern Colombia (Ripley 1977). This paper documents newly-discovered breeding populations of Colombian and Paint-billed crakes in Panama, and provides sight records of both in a possible zone of sympatry.

By late February, 1982, Panama was well into its dry season. At Tocumen Marsh, eastern Panama province, just east of the International Airport, the vast rice fields interspersed with savanna-like habitat were dry. Extensive areas of the once great "marsh" had been burned for agricultural purposes, concentrating many birds into any remaining habitat. Standing water remained only in the few small lakes and ponds, and in several shallow drainage ditches. Where cover remained, these vestiges of aquatic habitat attracted aggregations of waterbirds,

including predatory and fish-eating species; attracted to concentrations of dying fishes, which were suffocating in the last few warm, shallow, crowded pools.

One area with much activity was a shallow, mostly dry rice field ditch located *ca* one road km beyond the main entrance to Tocumen Marsh. On February 3 and 19, I explored this ditch with Ben Feltner and others. Both days we were impressed with several dozen Soras (*Porzana carolina*), which we saw and heard, as well as the numerous other small waterbirds concentrated by low and falling water levels. At this ditch, during February 21 and 22, David Wolf, Bret Whitney, and Jan Pierson, accompanied by other birders, observed rails matching the description of Colombian and/or Paint-billed crakes. Learning of their good fortune, I returned to the area on the morning of February 23, accompanied by Marg Benson and Polly Rothstein. By 6:15 a.m., we were stationed at the ditch. At 6:30 a.m., a Spotted Rail (*Pardirallus maculatus*), walked out of the tall grass into an open muddy area *ca* 8 m from us.

We noted the yellowish-green bill which had a red spot at the base of the mandible, the red eyes, red legs, and the body plumage wholly patterned in black and white. We observed the bird for about 45 seconds, then briefly several times until about 6:45 a.m. This represented the third report of Spotted Rail in Panama, and the second from Tocumen Marsh where breeding was confirmed in 1978 (Emanuel 1980). In the not-yet-bright light, I obtained poor but recognizable transparencies of the bird. On February 27, David Wolf saw a Spotted Rail at this same location, and February 28, six of us observed the bird, also early in the morning.

At about 6:45 a.m., February 28, our first Colombian Crake ran along the grassy edge of the ditch about 15 m distant. During this brief sighting, I noted the short red and yellow bill, and generally dark plumage devoid of spots or barring. Moments later, another bird crossed the ditch about 5 m from us. We noted the solid dark slaty underparts, brownish cast to the back and wings, bicolored bill, red



Colombian Crake, *Neocrex columbianus*, at Tocumen Marsh, Republic of Panama, Feb. 23, 1983. Photo/R.A. Behrstock.

legs, and small white throat patch. Another bird somewhat farther away and moving in a different direction led us to believe at least three adults were present that morning. All three birds exhibited the same combination of field marks. I obtained photographs which illustrate the characteristics noted above. The birds were very difficult to photograph, always scooting rapidly along the grassy margins, or running across the open muddy areas, making only the briefest stops. These photos document the presence of Colombian Crake on the Pacific slope of Panama.

AT 6:50 A.M., a somewhat different bird appeared about 8 m from us. This bird walked slowly and less warily into the open, and unlike its predecessors, remained in view for at least 30 seconds, during which time I photographed it. As it moved across the open muddy areas, it tested each step, occasionally becoming stuck in the sticky surface film, and having to wiggle its mired foot to free it. This rail also had red legs, but the bill was dull pink, lacking the bicolored effect of the adult's. The body plumage was very similar to that of the adult's except that the brownish primaries were not fully grown, giving the bird a club-winged appearance. The juvenile appeared barely smaller than the adults, but that may have been due to the shorter wing length. Several times the bird picked at objects on the mud, but we were unable to see if it swallowed anything. The young bird disappeared for a minute or two, reappeared for about 15 sec., then vanished. We had several more quick looks at the adults. By 7:00 a.m., these rails had retired to the tall grass, and by 7:15 a.m., the less shy Soras had also withdrawn to cover. I believe that the presence of a juvenile with newly-emerging primaries, *i.e.*, flightless, Colombian Crake at Tocumen Marsh is indicative of their breeding on the Pacific slope of Panama. This location is about 75 km southeast of the collecting site of the first Panamanian specimen, and is on the other (south) side of the Continental Divide. This brings up the question whether the Tocumen birds represent the sparsely distributed *N. c. ripleyi*, or the more widely ranging *N. c. columbianus* of northeast and Pacific coastal Colombia and northwest Ecuador. While high speed film, low light levels, and long exposures all combine to alter the hues of a photograph, my slides depict an adult bird with blue-gray head, neck, and ven-

tral plumage, highly suggestive of the paler *N. c. columbianus*.

While discussing this situation with David Wolf, I learned that in addition to seeing two adult *N. columbianus* on February 21, he, Whitney and Pierson had observed on February 21, 22, and 27, from one to perhaps as many as five *Neocrex* crakes with barred flanks and under tail coverts, *i.e.*, Paint-billed Crakes at the same site! Initially, these observations appeared to constitute the first Panamanian records of *N. erythropus*, but pursuing the topic yielded the following information. The United States National Museum received one of two *Neocrex* crakes collected November 10, 1981 by Donald C. Booth and Wilberto Martinez. The birds were taken 6 km west of the Changuinola airport, in the Caribbean coastal lowlands of Bocas del Toro province, Panama. Here, the birds were apparently resident and evidently common, as pairs could frequently be seen at wet openings and along the road. Although difficult to observe during the day, the birds could readily be seen at dusk, and



Colombian Crake, immature, Tocumen Marsh, Feb. 23, 1983. Photo/R.A. Behrstock.

presumably dawn. The habitat was tall grass and ditches surrounding rice fields. White-throated Crakes (*Laterallus albigularis*), were found in the same habitat. These last three points parallel our experience with *Neocrex* on the Pacific slope. The specimen was examined by S. D. Ripley, and determined to represent not *N. c. ripleyi*, already known from the Caribbean slope of Panama, but *N. erythropus olivascens*, the wide-ranging race of Paint-billed Crake found in Colombia, Venezuela, Suriname, Brazil, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Argentina. This same stock had recently colonized the Galapagos, and bears a remarkable likeness to the

somewhat larger endemic Zapata Rail (*Cyanolymnas cerverei*), of Cuba.

No study has been made of the two *Neocrex* in their possible zone of overlap in western Ecuador (*pers. comm.*, R. S. Ridgely). Thus, it would be of great interest to follow the situation in Panama; first, to determine whether *erythropus* stays to breed on the Pacific coast of Panama; and second, to see if it interbreeds with the similar *columbianus*. Additionally, now that the wide-ranging *N. e. olivascens* has a foothold in Central America, will it continue to spread northward? And, were the individuals taken in Texas and Virginia (Arnold 1978, Scott 1979) truly "vagrants," or merely overzealous pioneers radiating from the fringes of an already expanding population?

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This paper is dedicated to the memory of Bill Clow who, during his brief sojourn among us showed many people how to walk through life with open eyes, open ears, and an open heart.

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