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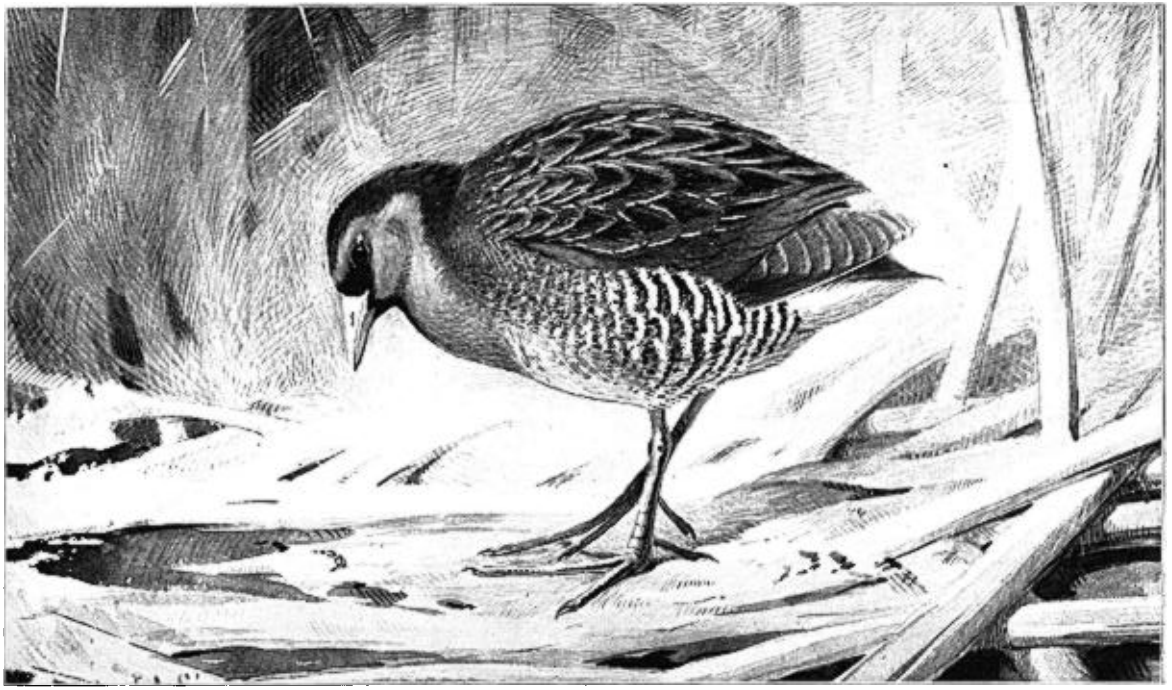
NOTES ON CAPTIVE PALUDICOLAE.

BY ROBERT J. SIM.

To a naturalist whose home is far from any extensive marshes the opportunity to study rail-birds seldom comes. Even a month's stay in the neighborhood of acres and miles of swamps may result in only a few glimpses of the birds in question. And in such cases the rails are usually on the alert. They seem to fancy that danger lurks in every movement the observer may make. Now imagine trying to study intimately the ways of a human being if that person continually labored under the impression that his observer was bent on killing!

On April 29, 1907, an adult Sora Rail was brought to me. It was alive and in good condition except that one wing was a little stiff. Here was a chance to become acquainted with a rail and prove to him that there were no evil intentions or blunderbusses concealed about my person. He was liberated in a large room and provided with a dripping-pan of water, some mud, and, just for the sake of old times, a bunch of cat-tails. We spent many hours together studying each other. The world will never know what has been lost through the rail's inability to keep notes.

For several hours he skulked in dark corners and always succeeded in keeping some object between himself and the



SORA RAIL (*Porzana Carolina*) after sketches from life. R. J. S. Jan. 1911.

human. But with increasing appetite and growing curiosity he became bolder. An earthworm was tossed to the floor a few feet away. The rail walked slowly out, picked up the worm, then dashed back to cover. After all this was repeated a few times with no ill results he stepped out more promptly and retired more slowly. From then on our familiarity grew. I have had several species (alive) of nearly every order represented in Ohio, and have yet to see the bird that will not resume its usual actions after it has once become accustomed to the presence of man.

A rail which is quite at ease is very different in appearance from one that is frightened or at all nervous. Most birds of this kind to be seen in taxidermial collections look as if they had been "scared stiff"—a state of things which is, perhaps, consistent enough. But a live, comfortable rail going about his own business is as graceful a bird as you could find, and plump like a guinea-hen or a Hubbard squash. The tail is carried in a horizontal position or droops slightly. On the other hand, when filled with apprehension the bird is very slim, the head is lowered and extended, and the tail is cocked up or is twitched up at every step. All the above in this paragraph applies as well to the Virginia Rail, the Coot and the Florida Gallinule. (The Sora shown in my drawing is in the act of pausing to inspect something on the ground before him).

As you know, all rails have long toes which enable them to keep up where the walking is soft. Without being in the least awkward about it my bird often stepped on his own toes, and nearly always stood with the inner pair crossed. When walking his movements were quick and noiseless even on the bare floor. I could never touch the bird, but his shyness was exceeded by his curiosity; and whenever I sat still for a little while he would walk round and round my chair, finally jumping up to my foot, knee, shoulder, and head, pecking at every thing on his way up. All drawing and writing had to be done slowly; for any quick movements would scare my subject away.

A Carolina Rail, it will be remembered, is scarcely more than eight inches in length. But when running it can set an astonishing pace, leaving tracks a foot apart! At such times the feathers are pressed close and the body is tilted up astern.

While in captivity my bird fed upon small beetles and earth-worms. One or two large "night-walkers" sufficed for a meal, but if the worms were smallish eight or ten were not too many. Considerable water was used inside and out. After a bath the wings were held in a roof-like position — like the wings of a Noctuid moth. In similar circumstances coots and gallinules expose their primaries to the sunlight in the same way.

At night the Sora roosted in some dark corner on the floor. He stood up on both feet with his head turned around and tucked under the humeral feathers from above.

A druggist in Jefferson once kept a live Coot in the store-window for some time. A corn-field was reproduced, for effect, in miniature. This bird ate all the insides out of a jack-o-lantern, reaching in thru the eyes and nose to do it, but instead of "shinning up a corn-stalk" to roost—as the owner declared—the coot spent his nights on the floor. His attitude in sleep was like that of the rail—excepting that he stood on one foot only. The other was quite concealed.

To me the marsh-birds have always had something of mystery about them. They seem to have been handed down to us from an earlier epoch and undergone little change. The robins, wrens, and other familiar birds quite likely looked on with approval when our hairy, low-browed ancestors gave up their arboreal habits and took to the ground; but the rails and mud-hens, or birds not far different, must have skulked in the shadows of huge amphibious animals in times when there were no men. There is something peculiar in the quizzical, half sinister glance of a rail-bird. One feels that this little dark eye had vague memories of sights which would make a man's blood run cold. It is at once alluring and forbidding. We are never taken fully into the confidence of a

marsh bird. Compare the look of a Rail with the honest, open regard of a robin.....All this, as you will say, is quite subjective and unscientific: but I leave it to you — *isn't* there something uncanny about a rail-bird?

THE RESULTS OF THE MERSHON EXPEDITION TO THE CHARITY ISLANDS, LAKE HURON.

BIRDS.

BY N. A. WOOD.

INTRODUCTION.

As may be inferred from the title, this paper is one of a series that is to appear on the fauna and flora of the Charity Islands, as the result of investigations carried on by different members of the Mershon Expedition of the University of Michigan Museum. A brief account of this expedition * by Dr. Ruthven has already appeared. It will be sufficient to say here that the work was made possible through the generosity of Hon. W. B. Mershon, of Saginaw, Michigan, and that it was carried on under the direction of Dr. Ruthven during the summer of 1910 by six men, each of whom gave primary attention to a particular group. The writer was given charge of the vertebrate work, and, the mammals, reptiles and amphibians being few in number, was able to devote nearly the entire time to a study of the birds. He arrived at the Charity Islands on August 16 and remained there until October 11. During a part of the time he was assisted by Mr. Frederick Gaige, who was on the island from September 7–28, and considerable assistance both in the way of specimens and data was received from the light-house keeper, Captain Charles C. McDonald, and his assistant, Mr. Joseph Singleton. Captain McDonald's assistance was particularly valuable as he had resided upon the island for

* Science, N. S., xxxiii, pp. 208-209.