

Documentation for the PORC

Species: **Yellow Rail** (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*)

Name: Cameron Rutt

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Other Observers: Adam Stuckert and Jarrod Derr

Location: In a weedy field just east of Bishop Road, Grantham, Upper Allen Township, Cumberland County. The field is located east of a similar field owned by Messiah College, known as the "Back 40."

Date and Length of time observed: 15 March 2007. Adam, Jarrod, and I were walking back to campus after enjoying a number of American Woodcocks displaying and calling at approximately 7:40 PM. Checking with <weather.com>, I found that the local area sunset for this evening was at 7:15 PM. With diminishing light, I was still able to pick out an American Woodcock flying overhead, despite the fact that it was 25 minutes after sunset. Immediately afterwards, on our walk back, I noticed something that ran from the path in front of me, close to my feet. I initially thought it was a rodent of some kind, but interestingly, it stopped after a short run. After the three of us were able to locate the "creature" on the ground, it was obvious that we were looking at some kind of small bird. I was, at first, unsure of what this was, and I initially thought that it might be some kind of small quail. Shortly afterwards, it became apparent that I was looking at a Yellow Rail. We were able to keep the bird in sight for the next few minutes before we intentionally flushed the bird.

All in all, we watched the bird for approximately five minutes. Although a small party of local birders attempted to search for the bird the following morning (16 March 2007), the effort was unsuccessful. Snow was already covering the ground by dawn on the 16th and it continued snowing throughout our 1.5 hour to 2 hour search. Unfortunately, due to the nature of this bird and the fact that it was on private property, I made the decision not to alert more people to the bird's presence.

Optics: The bird was seen through my Swarovski 8.5 by 42 EL binoculars. Throughout the observation, I was able to be within approximately 5-10 feet of the bird allowing great views of the bird, considering the low-light conditions.

Habitat and Behavior: I found it interesting that the bird didn't simply run away at any point throughout our observation. If it would have decided to simply take off, we would have certainly lost it in short order. Instead the bird would run short distances and then freeze in a location, almost as though it decided to sit down. It was my opinion that if we didn't pursue the bird too closely, it would remain in one location. With the three of us trained on the bird, we were able to move about the bird to obtain closer (although not really needed) or less obstructed views. If we got too close, the bird would again quickly run a short distance and stop. These runs seemed to be in short bursts. Once the bird halted and remained motionless, it was very hard to locate if you didn't already know approximately where the bird had stopped. At one point, I watched it scamper over a bit of vegetation that was tilted over. The bird was amazingly hard to flush which was a great trait for our sake.

After obtaining a good view, I decided that I wanted to flush the bird in hopes of seeing the remaining field mark for which this bird is well known. In reality, this proved to be a bit of a harder task than I would have imagined. The three of us pursued the bird, barely able to follow its shadowy movement across the ground. We were finally able to surround the bird, with the three

of us forming a triangle around the bird, only about two feet from each of us. It was then that the bird took flight and we decided not to pursue the bird any further.

The bird was present in a relatively dry, upland field, although there were some small wet patches that were visible the following morning. In my opinion, the vegetation was quite sparse, again making for ideal viewing. The field seemed to be primarily composed of knee-to-waist high dead vegetation, of which I could identify goldenrod (*Solidago* sp.) and Queen Anne's lace (*Daucus carota*). There were some patches of low, dried, buffy-colored grass as well. With a better analysis of the habitat the next day, more "suitable" (or at least what I consider better Yellow Rail habitat) habitat seemed to exist in the fields. Between the field that the bird was present in and the adjacent field, owned by Messiah College, there was a good amount of habitat available to this bird if it chose to relocate.

Weather: The evening was cloudy to almost completely overcast with winds from the NNE at 7 mph. The temperature outside (as of 7:45 PM) was 38° although with the wind chill made it feel like 33°. The weather changed drastically overnight with the nor'easter moving in and depositing sleet/snow in the early morning hours changing to snow throughout the day (March 16th). I believe that by the end of March 16th there was something in the neighborhood of 8-10 inches of snow on the ground. This sudden snow storm was only days after our first real spring warm spell with temperatures into the 70s, I believe.

Description: My description is primarily taken from notes written the evening of the Yellow Rail sighting, before looking at any field guide. With the low-light conditions, the bird was essentially visible in three tones: white, pale, and dark. One of the things that struck me immediately was the bird's fairly clearly defined white belly. As I checked Sibley's after writing up my description, I was surprised to see a lack of a white belly in his depictions of the Yellow Rail. I did, however, come across a couple photos that clearly show at least some Yellow Rails containing white bellies. Two websites are listed below. The breast of the bird was pale, but not white, with a well marked difference between this color and the white belly. The most distinctive mark on the face was certainly a dark eye "mask" that seemed to droop behind the eye. Although I tried to discern the coloration of the bill, I wasn't very successful. The bird's bill was certainly not long, however.

The upperparts were very dark overall and I thought this darkness may have continued onto the flanks, although I wasn't sure about this. One of the first field marks that became apparent on the dark back were a number of fairly wide, distinct, pale longitudinal stripes (extending from bill to tail directionally). Even with the low levels of light, this characteristic was surprisingly easy to pick out, perhaps due to the stark dark/light contrast. A couple of times, I was able to see one of these stripes that appeared to puff out, in a way reminiscent of a short tuft of pale grass. As I crept closer to the bird, I was able to discern thin cross marks that ran perpendicular to the wider, pale longitudinal stripes. This was much more challenging to pick out. The bird's nape appeared to have a more varied, confusing combination of dark and pale markings. In general, the bird showed a contrast of dark upperparts against pale underparts.

The bird was extremely hard to flush, and when we chased the bird it simply ran away at a fairly good clip. It appeared that it may have tripped or lost balance in some manner as the bird showed an obvious flash of bright white at one point (assumedly stretching out its right wing while still running). I was only a few feet behind the bird at this point, and the flash of white was easily seen naked eye. We finally managed to corner the bird and it initially sat motionless between the three of us. At this point, the bird practically disappeared to the naked eye. It then flew away from us revealing distinct white wing patches in flight. Again, this was very obvious without binoculars. The bird's flight appeared weak and fluttery and it was our thought that the bird likely didn't fly too far. However, we decided not to harass the bird further and gave up the chase for the evening.

Pictures depicting the Yellow Rail's white belly:

<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Yellow_Rail_dtl.html>

<http://www.members.cox.net/wdpatton/yellow_rail.1.htm>

Similar Species: No other quail-like bird shows obvious white wing patches in flight. While the

combination of this and the other aforementioned characteristics preclude any other possibility, I will still differentiate it from Sora, the most likely source of confusion. Numerous features differ from Sora including the bird's dark eye mask, pale buffy stripes on a darker back, white wing patches, and different habits among other characteristics.

Note: I was able to obtain a number of pictures of the field habitat where the bird was present. The pictures were taken the morning (March 16th) after our sighting on the 15th. Pictures were taken with a Sony Cyber-Shot camera and none of the pictures were tampered with in any way.

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation – Round One

Species: Yellow Rail (Coturnicops noveboracensis)

Date of Sighting: 15 March 2007 to 15 March 2007

Location: CUMBERLAND

County : UPPER ALLEN TOWNSHIP

Observer(s): C. Rutt, A. Stuckert, J. Derr

Date of Submission: 2007

Submitted by: Cameron Rutt

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

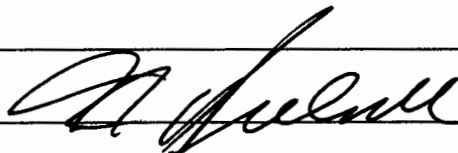
Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A	Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	Abstain
R. Wiltraut			X					
A. Guarente			X					
T. Johnson			X					
B. Coulter			X					
E. Witmer			X					
J. Heller			X					
G. Malosh			X					
TOTALS			7					
DECISION			X					

Comments: *7/0*

Signature (Secretary)



Date:

12/16/07