

232-01-1994

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237 E. Areba Ave.  
Hershey, Pa. 17033  
July 27, 1994

Dear Barb and Frank,

Enclosed is a short account of my exciting spring find which you can use in PA BIRDS if you like. It was very difficult keeping this a secret, but I was concerned about the damage that overtaping would have on the success of this bird. It turned out to be a very good ethical exercise for me as a birder. My brother heard the bird the second evening, and the two people that wandered along on the 30th are very good, but low-key birders who did not care to be included with the original siting report. I played my recoding of the bird briefly on the first day to obtain a site record; the look I got was typical but probably lucky for daytime (7 am)-a sparrow-sized black bird running rapidly through the grass! I did not get any other field marks and did not want to disturb him any more to obtain them. It was clearly the origin of the *kikiki-krrr*. I was interested in the atypical 4-syllabled call of this bird and I intent to send a copy of it to Cornell Labs to see if they have any similar recordings. Perhaps it is a local dialect which would add interest to the wanderings of this bird. The enclosed report should also serve as the same for PORC, however I would be happy to make a tape for the committee if necessary. During the course of this observation I scanned the area for possible female calls as a noninvasive way to confirm pairing, but I had no luck. The area was combed carefully by myself and Dan Brauning on July 20, but no evidence of breeding was obtained--it was a long shot. I discussed the bird with Dan about mid-way into the calling period and asked him to keep it quiet, which he honored knowing that I drew the line in front of my own closest birding friends. He has obviously heard the original recording of the bird and will confirm its identification. I did not send this to Randy Miller due to the lateness of the final outing, so you can add it to his report for Lebanon County. As there may be some possibility that the bird was successful, I personally am still not disclosing the exact site until after next year. From the other records, it is unlikely that a return will occur, but who knows?

Happy birding,

*Steve Ramsdell*

232-01-1994



## Black Rail in Lebanon County

Steve Rannels

On the morning of May 30, 1994, I was attracted to an unusual song of a Lebanon County Song Sparrow. After several minutes of observation a loud, clear *kikiki-krrr* sounded from behind. I had never heard this call in the field, but recognized it as a variation of the distinctive three-syllabled *kiki-krrr* of the male Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*). The bird sang constantly for 15-20 minutes at a rate of 30 per minute from an open marshy field containing sedges, rushes and grasses, but devoid of cattails, a plant included in the habitat descriptions of several recent Pennsylvania Black Rail reports (1). Additional vegetation in the area included sensitive fern in the wet areas and goldenrods, ironweed, and joe-pye weed in the meadow. All plants were less than 12 inches high at the time of the initial observation. The area was also inhabited by Grasshopper, Song and Swamp Sparrows, Bobolink, Eastern Meadowlark, Red-winged Blackbird and both Green frog and Fowler's toad called constantly during the night. Why would a Black Rail select this site? A short grass meadow is clearly similar to the typical coastal marsh habitat of this species, and it is possible that the relatively high density of calling Fowler's toads in this area may have provided an additional nocturnal clue which could attract a migrating rail. This toad is abundant only on the Atlantic coastal plain.

The rail was recorded for 10 minutes and a short playback of three songs was given. The bird immediately ceased calling, then after one minute began calling again within 20 feet of my position, slowly moving closer and calling simultaneously. The calling rate increased to 45 per minute (counted from the recording) and each call had increased significantly in volume. I could see the vegetation move as he walked within three feet of my location, then suddenly the bird ran head down and rapidly just in front of my feet. Perhaps realizing his error, he slowly retreated back to his original location 100 feet away, calling again at the slower rate and issuing a few raspy scolding calls. A little later two birders arrived at the scene, but as we talked I did not disclose what had just happened. Suddenly the rail started up again. I enjoyed observing the mental calculations as they independently arrived at the correct identification. We talked for an hour and concluded that our silence was the only way to protect the bird's chances of breeding.

I returned to the site on the evening of the next day and the bird called several times at dusk. He called briefly on a subsequent pre-dawn visit four days later, but only after sunrise; there was no singing three days later from dusk into darkness. Four days later (13 days after the initial observation), the bird did not call from 5-7 am, however he responded with two calls to a short playback of his voice, but only after a 60 minute delay. No calling was heard on two subsequent visits over the next two weeks. Over this entire period I persistently scanned the area with a parabolic dish-microphone, listening for the softer *hoo-hoo-hooo* call of the female, but without success. On the 20th of July the area was carefully combed for the first time but no birds were seen or heard in response to recorded calls.

The calling period was shorter for this bird than for the Westmoreland and Centre County records, which continued for approximately one month, but is similar to the 1985 Lancaster County bird which called only from May 16-25 (1). It is possible that daytime calling may have been ongoing prior to May 30 since other birds were heard as early as the 16th and 23rd of May. Daytime calling has been interpreted as desperate or perhaps frustrated behavior for inland vagrants. The near silence of this Lebanon County bird suggests the possibility of pairing and nesting activity. This species is notably very territorial but is reported to stop calling after nesting begins. However, because no direct evidence of nesting was obtained, the behavior of this bird only adds to the mystery of the species. This report describes one of four Pennsylvania observations in the past 10 years, a frequency which suggests that Black Rails may be more commonly present than previously thought. Because of the possibility that nesting may have occurred, the location of this site should remain protected for future observations.

(1) Brauning, D. W., Editor, Atlas of Breeding Birds in Pennsylvania, 1992.

## Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

### Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of

Species: **Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*)**

Date of Sighting: **30 May 1994 to 12 June 1994**

Location: **LEBANON COUNTY**

County: **LEBANON**

Observer(s): **Steve Rannels**

Date of Submission: **1994**

Submitted by: **Steve Rannels**

Written Description: **YES**      Photo: **NO**      Specimen: **NO**

Recording: **AUDIO**

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas	X							
N. Pulcinella	X							
E. Kwater	X							
R. Ickes	X							
G. McWilliams	X							
P. Schwalbe	X							
S. Feldstein	X							
TOTALS	7							
DECISION	X							

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

*F. C. Haas*

Date:

2-22-97