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Black Rail in Berks County

by Mark W. Miller and Mark Monroe

Exploring the out-of-doors at night introduces the naturalist to a mysterious, and sometimes unnerving world. Strange sounds emanating from the darkness become the norm. Many nocturnal animals are notoriously secretive. Often they may be heard calling from distant mountains, deep forest, and nearby marshes. However, these animals are rarely seen, and therein lies the heart of their mystery. Unraveling such nocturnal mysteries is an exciting and rewarding challenge for scientists who venture into the darkness.

During Spring 1999, MWM initiated a study of frog and toad breeding-community dynamics in northern Berks County, PA. The study design involved visiting several wetlands each week-night to document breeding activity. A tape recorder was used to create a permanent record of amphibian vocalizations during each visit. Field work, which began on 4 May, continues.

The study involved identifying amphibian species by sound, and a concerted effort was made to identify all animal sounds at least to class. During the first two weeks of the study several bird species were heard singing or calling, including Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), Killdeer (*Charadrius vociferus*), Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*), and an occasional passerine. However, nothing unusual was noted. MWM often did field work alone, and happened to be alone on May 17, the tenth night of the study. That night at 11:00 pm an unusual bird-like call was heard upon arriving at one of the study sites, the Cricket Farm Marsh, a marsh

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at the south-east corner of the intersection of Mountain Road and New Bethel Church Road in Albany Township, along the foot of the Kittatinny Ridge. MWM has extensive birding experience, particularly with wetland birds. However, this call was unfamiliar to him. The calls were loud, persistent and nearby, and were easily recorded on tape. When amphibian sampling was finished, the first author turned his attention to the unusual call, which he assumed was probably made by a migrant shorebird. After a few more minutes of listening and taping, he decided to move to the next study site and to ask the second author about the call the following day.

Upon hearing the taped call, MM immediately suggested that it was made by a Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*), but first wanted to compare it with taped calls of other rails. We compared the call to those of all North American rail species on a commercially available tape of bird vocalizations, and we both concluded that the bird at the amphibian study site was indeed a male Black Rail. That day MM posted the discovery on the PaBirds internet listserver, and we estimate that ≥ 100 people subsequently visited the Cricket Farm Marsh and heard the rail call. Several visitors also made tape recordings of the call, and at least one visitor videotaped the marsh, albeit at night.

The rail's call was loud, clear and unique, so the first author is certain in retrospect that the bird had not called during previous amphibian surveys on 4-7 May or 10-14 May. However, no survey was made on 15-16 May. A Black Rail was heard calling at the site by at least one of us on 17 - 21 and 28 May and on 1 and 2 June. The second author measured call frequency during the afternoon, evening and night. The bird tended to call with low frequency between 1500 and near dusk. During the last hour before dusk call frequency increased until calling

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became virtually continuous. The bird then tended to fall silent for approximately two hours, after which it resumed calling every 6-10 seconds for hours into the night. On 1 June individual calls themselves seemed noticeably slower. The bird was last heard during the 2 June amphibian survey when it called twice. It was not heard again by either of us, nor to our knowledge by anyone else. The bird was seen on 23 May by Joe Majdan who posted his sighting on the PaBirds listserv.

Black Rails are not known to breed in Pennsylvania, and only approximately 14 previous records exist for the species in the state (Poole 1964; Schutsky 1992). Our record is the first for this species in Berks County (Uhrich 1997). At one point the second author felt that he may have heard a female Black Rail as well, but that call was not recorded or confirmed. The Cricket Farm Marsh is dominated by low non-woody vegetation, apparently grasses and sedges, although we have not entered the property to examine vegetation closely. Standing water is restricted largely to a small pond and a stream converted to a drainage ditch. Cattails are not dominant. The marsh is approximately 75 x 150 m at most, and is located in a highly agricultural area. Two sides are bordered by crop land, one by a horse pasture and one by a woodlot. The pasture and one field of small grains were separated from the marsh by the two roads mentioned above.

Schutsky (1992) stated that birders must conduct "serious nocturnal field work" to better understand the distribution and breeding status of the Black Rail in Pennsylvania. However, to do so birders may have to consciously decide to venture outdoors after dark, knowing that relatively few species will be encountered, knowing that those few species that are encountered probably will not be seen, and believing that their chances of finding a Black Rail are small. Herpetologists regularly conduct fieldwork at night in wetland habitat, tend to rely on auditory cues out of

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necessity and frequently tape record what they hear. As interest in amphibian research and monitoring increases, herpetologists familiar with nocturnal sounds in general may add greatly to our understanding of the distribution, if not breeding status, of nocturnal wetland birds. Such inter-disciplinary cooperation can only benefit the fauna of Pennsylvania and should be explored.

Acknowledgments

Keith L. Bildstein and Laurie J. Goodrich made helpful editorial suggestions on an earlier draft of the manuscript. This is Hawk Mountain Sanctuary contribution number 81.

References

- Poole, E. L. 1964. Pennsylvania birds: An annotated checklist. Livingston Publishing Company, Narberth, PA.
- Schutsky, R.M. 1992. Black Rail *Laterallus jamaicensis*. Pages 120-121 in Atlas of breeding birds in Pennsylvania, D. W. Brauning (Ed.). University of Pittsburgh Press, Pittsburgh.
- Uhrich, W.D. 1997. A century of bird life in Berks County, Pennsylvania. Reading Public Museum, Reading, PA.

Hawk Mountain Sanctuary

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Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Ballot - Round One

Species: Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*)

Date of Sighting: 17 May 1999 to 2 June 1999

Location: BERKS

County: CRICKET FARM MARSH

Observer(s): Mark Miller, Mark Monroe, Devich Farbotnik

Date of Submission: 1999

Submitted by: Mark Miller, Mark Monroe, Devich Farbotnik

Written Description: No

Photo: Yes

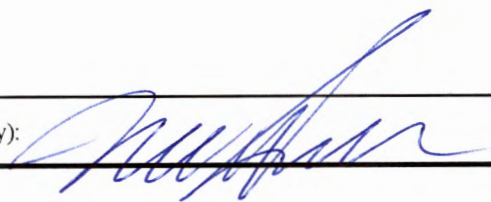
Specimen: No

Recording: Audio

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
G. Armistead	X							
D. Couchman	X							
P. Hess	X							
R. Ickes	X							
M. Sharp	X							
B. Reid	X							
P. Rodewald	X							
TOTALS	7							
DECISION	X							

Comments: 7/0/0

Signature (Secretary):



Date: 12/3/00