

234-01 -1993

## The Clapper Rail in Pennsylvania

On November 8, 1993 the Ornithology Department of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (ANSP) received a phone report of a 'strange looking' bird that was sitting on a window ledge at 2108 Spring Street, in Center City Philadelphia. The report was made by an employee of the School District of Philadelphia, whose offices overlook Spring Street. Although the caller could not identify the bird, he felt that it was so unusual in appearance, that it must have escaped from the ANSP, or somehow wandered into the wrong place. At the time of the report (12 noon) the bird had been observed sitting in the same spot for 2 hours.

After receiving the report the author proceeded to the address at which the bird had been seen, arriving there around 12:30 P.M. The address (2108 Spring Street) was a row home on a primarily residential block which was tree lined. The bird was easily found perched precariously on a narrow window ledge of the first floor of the house, about 6 feet above ground level, and was being harassed by several passers by. I then observed the bird from as close as 4 feet without it moving, and found it to be a Clapper Rail, a large bird, completely grayish in color, and with a long de-curved bill. No visible injuries could be seen on the bird. Upon even closer approach it erected its plumage, increasing its apparent size, and made a hissing noise.

In order to try to get the rail to a more favorable location I left the area for five minutes in order to obtain a plastic bag in which to carry it. Believing that the bird was either too injured or too disoriented to flee, I attempted to simply pick it up. At this point it flew off the ledge and across the street, rising to a height of 25 feet, and struck a glass window. After audibly hitting the window it continued flying west along Spring Street where I quickly lost sight of it through the trees. A subsequent search was made for the bird throughout the area but without success. The bird was never reported again. Despite the bird's initial reluctance to move, no visible signs of injury were detected during the period of observation, and its eventual flight was strong and direct.

Clapper Rails have been reported previously in Pennsylvania. The following list summarizes the other Pennsylvania records I am aware of.

- 1) Wilson (1813) reported finding 3 week old Clapper Rails along the Delaware River (location ?) on August 10 (year ?), but may have misidentified young King Rails. Clapper Rails have otherwise never been reported breeding in Pennsylvania.
- 2) Warren (1890) mentions that a specimen was taken "in the state" by Dr. Detwiller but gives no location or date.
- 3) Warren (1890) also reported that a bird was captured in Lancaster County by G. W. Hensel (date ?), and Poole adds in his manuscript that this specimen was taken on the Conestoga River in Lancaster County. Beck (1924) also mentions a now lost specimen from the "Conestoga River" taken "many years ago." It is likely that the specimen discussed by Beck is the same one discussed by Warren and Poole.
- 4) Both Warren (1890) and Stone (1894) mention that a specimen was collected near Chester City, Delaware County, in September 1880 by George R. Hoopes.
- 5) Burns (1919) lists a record from Kennett Square, Chester County, from April 28, 1908.
- 6) Morrin (1991) reports that a bird was captured alive on April 25, 1946 at Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster County. The specimen was deposited in the North Museum in Reading, Pennsylvania.

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7) An injured bird was found in a back yard in the Kensington section of Philadelphia on April 17, 1956, and taken to the Philadelphia Zoo where it later died (Ulmer 1957).

8) John Griswald of the Philadelphia Zoo reported that a "thin and weak" bird was found at 240 N 61st Street in Philadelphia on August 23, 1958, which later died at the Philadelphia Zoo (Ulmer 1958, Poole manuscript).

9) John Griswald reported that a bird was found in a garage on August 31, 1958 in Strafford, Chester County, and was taken to the Philadelphia Zoo (Ulmer 1958, Poole manuscript).

10) John Griswald reported that a bird was captured in a large garage on September 15, 1958 at 850 N. 7th Street in Philadelphia and was taken to the Philadelphia Zoo (Ulmer 1958, Poole manuscript).

11) A bird was found dead in late August, 1988 near Latrobe, Westmorland County in western Pennsylvania (Santner et al. 1992).

Clapper Rails have evidently occurred sporadically in Pennsylvania for many years, primarily in the southeastern counties. The present record is the first for November. Of the nine records other than Wilson's for which there are dates, three are from April, three from August (all from the same year), two from September, and one from November. Interestingly, with the exception of the September, 1880 record, the remaining spring and fall records fall into two distinct eras. All of the records between 1908 and 1956 were from the spring, while all of the records since 1958 have been from the fall.

I would like to thank Mr. Ed Fingerhood for his help in providing information on many of the existing Pennsylvania Clapper Rail records.

Beck, H. H. 1924. (A chapter on the ornithology of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania with supplementary notes on the mammals). Pp. 1-39 *In* Lancaster County, Pennsylvania—a history. Lewis Historical Publishing Company, New York.

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Keith B. Russell  
Department of Ornithology  
The Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia

234-01-1993

# The Birds of North America



*Life Histories for the 21st Century*

BBC

August 1, 1995

The Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee  
2459 Hammertown Road  
Narvon, PA 17 555-9726

Dear Members of the Records Committee:

I was recently notified by your committee that a Clapper Rail record for Philadelphia county that I published in a recent issue of Pennsylvania Birds, had been rejected by the committee (record #234-01-1993). I was very surprised to receive this notification, principally because I had never submitted the record to the committee for consideration, and because I (rather naively) failed to realize that records published in Pennsylvania Birds would be automatically reviewed by the committee. Thank you for notifying me of your decision. Thank you also for subsequently agreeing to not publish a rejection of this record until I could provide you with additional information about it. I am grateful to Mr. Ed Fingerhood for intervening with Frank Haas on my behalf so that this record would be reconsidered. I am confident that with additional information, the record will be accepted.

The original description of the bird that appeared in Pennsylvania Birds (enclosed) was not intended to serve as an official report to the records committee. A more thorough description of the bird is provided below. For information on how the bird was discovered please see the Pennsylvania Birds report.

Date of observation: November 8, 1993

Location: 2108 Spring Street, Philadelphia, PA 19103 (Logan Circle District of Center City)

Time of observation: 12:30 - 12:35 P.M. / 12:45 - 12:50 P.M. There were two periods of observation between 12:30 and 12:50 P.M.. After initially observing the bird at 12:30 I left the area in order to procure a bag in which I planned to transport the bird to an animal shelter.

Weather conditions: Sunny, no wind or rain.

Distance of observation: During both periods of observation I was about 3-4 feet away from the bird. It was perched on a window ledge about 6 feet above the ground, at eye level. My view of the bird was unobstructed.

Equipment used: The bird was observed without optical equipment.

Behavior: The bird was originally found standing on the narrow first floor window ledge of a row home (about 6 feet above the ground). It stood quietly with plumage unraised during the first period of observation until I approached it more closely. When I was about 2 feet from the bird it erected its plumage and hissed. During the second period of observation I attempted to pick it up. Before I could touch it the bird flew from the window ledge, audibly struck the window of a building across the street, and continued flying down the street where I lost sight of it through trees.

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**Size:** The bird was the size of a medium sized chicken, decidedly larger than a pigeon.

**Shape:** The bird was generally round in shape with a medium to short neck and only a stub of a tail.

**Bill:** The bill was long (about twice the length of the head), narrow, and slightly downcurved. The specific color was not noted but it was neither very dark nor very light.

**Legs and feet:** The legs were medium in length (neither long or short) but the toes were very long and appeared ungainly as the bird clung to the narrow window ledge on which it stood. The color of the legs and feet was not noted but they were neither very dark nor very light.

**Wings:** The primaries of the closed wing did not extend beyond the body.

**Plumage color:** The bird was a uniform tawny/grayish color throughout. No areas on the bird's plumage were brightly colored (e.g., red, brown, yellow, green, etc.) The bird had no areas of very dark or very light coloration or any distinctive markings, but I did note that, at least, the flanks were indistinctly barred.

**Condition:** I originally thought that the bird may have been injured but I did not see any signs of injury to the bill, legs, eyes, body, wings, head, or plumage. The plumage appeared to be fresh (freshly molted/not worn). The strong flying ability exhibited by the bird suggests that it was neither injured or sick. The bird was unbanded.

In your letter you questioned whether the bird was of wild origin. I believe that the bird was of wild origin for the following reasons.

1) Rails are not kept as pets by the public.

2) I am not aware of any zoos or similar institutions in the Delaware Valley that have Clapper Rails in their collections. If a rail was kept by such institutions its wings would be kept clipped and it would probably also have leg bands. Neither was true of the bird in question. The bird also showed an aversion to being approached closely. A previously captive bird may have exhibited more accepting behavior to an approaching human. Finally, the bird's plumage and extremities showed absolutely no signs of wear or abrasion as one might find on a captive individual.

3) Clapper Rails have been reported in Pennsylvania on a number of previous occasions. Many of these reports were of 'downed' Clapper Rails being found in various parts of downtown Philadelphia during the spring and fall. It is therefore not unprecedented for this species to appear in Philadelphia, and to my knowledge the wild status of all previous individuals reported in Philadelphia has never been questioned.

After the bird flew away I was not able to find it again, and it was never reported subsequently. No photographs were taken of the bird, and it was never seen in direct proximity to other birds, which would have made a direct size comparison possible. Nevertheless, I was so close to the bird that I could have touched it with my nose. There are no doubts in my mind as to its size, color, shape, condition, and identity. As an experienced birder my abilities to accurately evaluate a bird's physical attributes (color, shape, size, etc.) can be vouched for by many individuals. The above description was based on notes written on the evening of November 8, 1993.

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I hope that this information will be helpful to the committee in making a final decision on the identity and origin of the bird in question. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any additional questions.

Sincerely,

Keith Russell

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Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia  
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Philadelphia, PA 19103-1195  
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215 844-2810 home

# PENNSYLVANIA BIRDS

Journal of the Pennsylvania Society for Ornithology



VOLUME 8, NUMBER 2, APR - JUN 1994

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## References

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- Morrin, H. (Editor) 1991. *A guide to the birds of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania* (2nd Edition). Lancaster County Bird Club, Lancaster, PA.
- Mulvihill, R. and R. Leberman 1989. Another Unique Rail Specimen from Southwestern Pennsylvania: a Clapper Rail. *Pennsylvania Birds* 3:14.
- Poole, E. L. (mid 1960s). Unpublished manuscript on the birds of Pennsylvania. Archived in the Department of

## Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

### Voting Ballot - Round One

Species: Clapper Rail (*Rallus longirostris*)

Date of Sighting: 8 November 1993 to 8 November 1993

Location: PHILADELPHIA

County: PHILADELPHIA

Observer(s): Keith Russell

Date of Submission: Original 1993. Resubmission 1998

Submitted by: Keith Russell

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

Specimen: No

Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
D. Couchman			X					
T. Floyd								X
P. Hess			X					
R. Ickes			X					
J. McWilliams			X					
B. Reid			X					
P. Rodewald			X					
TOTALS			6					1
DECISION			X					

**Comments:** This is a resubmission with further details.

6/0/1

Signature (Secretary):

Date:

2/8/02



**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of**

Species: **Clapper Rail (Rallus longirostris)**

Date of Sighting: **8 November 1993 to 8 November 1993**

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County: **PHILADELPHIA**

Observer(s): **Keith Russell**

Date of Submission: **1994**

Submitted by: **Keith Russell**

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

Recording: **NONE**

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	
J. Skinner						X		
<b>TOTALS</b>			2	2		2	1	
<b>DECISION</b>				X				

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

*F. C. Haas*

Date:

*3-31-95*