

Certain bird species represent almost as much of a challenge to locate as to identify. October's mystery bird is a premier example of such a situation. A cursory examination of the photo suggests that the bird is either the young of some species of gallinaceous bird or a rail of some sort. The relatively straight culmen (the ridge on the upper mandible), absence of a tiny hook on the bill tip, and long and slender tarsi (not short and stout) all indicate that the bird is not a galliform. By elimination, the bird is in the Order Gruiformes—cranes and rails.

Rails can be divided into the long-billed species and the short-billed species, which are often called crakes. Obviously, the mystery rail is one of North America's three short-billed species—Sora, Yellow Rail, or Black Rail. The tiny Black Rail can be eliminated at once because of the pictured rail's pale underparts, light-colored bill, and overall pale coloration. The Sora in its adult plumage is out of the running because it has a distinctive black face and throat. The juvenal and first winter plumage of the Sora, however, are similar enough to those of the Yellow Rail that separation of these two species can be tricky. Of course, part of the problem in distinguishing Soras from Yellow Rails is associated with the difficulties in observing rails of any species.

A diagnostic field mark of the Yellow Rail is the presence of white secondaries, which show as conspicuous white wing patches in flight. Unfortunately, the rail in the photo is neither flying nor in a position to clearly show the secondaries. Nonetheless, the pattern of the back is obvious—wide, dark, longitudinal stripes, prominently barred with white. These markings, in addition to a well-defined dark cheek patch and the presence of white spotting on the head clearly mark the mystery bird as a Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*). In addition to being larger in size than a Yellow Rail, an immature Sora would appear more black and more streaked above and would not show conspicuous white lateral bars on the feather tips.

In Massachusetts the Yellow Rail is a rare migrant, most often recorded in fall; however, its secretive nature may exaggerate its scarcity.

*Photo by
L. H. Walkinshaw.
Courtesy of MAS.*



AT A GLANCE

Photo by Ralph M. Care. Courtesy of MAS.



Can you identify this bird?

Identification will be discussed in next issue's AT A GLANCE.

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