

## BOOK REVIEW: *Shadowbirds: A Quest for Rails*

by Wayne R. Petersen

*Shadowbirds: A Quest for Rails* by William Burt. 1994. New York: Lyons & Burford. \$25.00.

Certain bird groups, such as waterfowl, birds of prey, and shorebirds, lend themselves to magnificent description. Others, such as thrushes, wood-warblers, and buntings, are often characterized in sentimental and flowery, if not gushy, prose. Each has its place in the ornithological literature; however, neither style is to be found between the covers of Bill Burt's *Shadowbirds*.

*Shadowbirds* treats the reader to something very different—an evocative and sensitive blend of literary genius that incorporates the finest elements of a historical novel, a gripping mystery, and a personal quest, along with a remarkable selection of photographs and observations of some of North America's least known and hard-to-find bird species.

As the author states in the introduction, "This book is about a quest for photographs of two birds, the black rail and the yellow rail: two shadowy little birds of the dark that live in marshes and are very, very hard to find—and still harder to photograph." While this, indeed, describes *Shadowbirds*, it belies some of the greater treasures awaiting the reader. Perhaps most importantly, it fails to impart the almost spiritual fashion in which Burt portrays the natural history of these mouselike *Gruiforms*.

Rails in general, but Black and Yellow rails in particular, are certainly among the most understated of the world's birds. Living as they do in salt meadows and prairie marshes—habitats featuring sameness and uniformity—and silent and obscure most of the year, they are the perfect subjects for a mystery and a quest. Bill Burt's exceptional knowledge of, and unabashed passion for, these feathered mites is abundantly exposed in this delightful book.

Beginning on a sultry June evening on a Maryland salt meadow, Burt immediately introduces the reader to the Black Rail and to Judge John H. Clark, the first ornithologist to find (in 1884) the species' nest in Connecticut—still the only New England state in which the Black Rail has ever unequivocally nested. Besides the Black Rail and Judge Clark, we learn of other denizens of those vast green swards bordering the eastern shore of Chesapeake Bay. The Marsh and Sedge wrens, the Sharp-tailed and Henslow's sparrows, and those two most elegant of rails—the King and Clapper—are described with vibrant clarity, just as are the grasses and sedges that comprise the principal habitat of the tiny Black Rail. And while enabling the reader to sense the exhilaration derived from the fragrance of salt air or to be blistered by the blazing shimmer of the Maryland midday sun, Burt also makes us squirm with his sizzling descriptions

of the ferocity of salt marsh mosquitoes.

Throughout his eloquent accounting of marshes, rails, and their vocalizations, and bittersweet photographic episodes, there are wonderful descriptions of the author's many human encounters made during his pursuit of rails and their portraits. These human encounters include descriptions of folks that all birders meet from time to time, each in his or her own way. Burt's encounters will surely bring a smile to all who have ever stood on a lonely back road listening for owls at night, or who have ever asked a local for directions to an unnamed pond or marsh in an unfamiliar region.

In a parallel, yet very different, scenario, Burt artfully segues the reader from the salt meadows of the mid-Atlantic Coast to the teeming prairie pothole country of North Dakota and Manitoba. In the section of the book titled, "Another Bird, Another Meadow, and a Golden Moon," we meet Reverend P.B. Peabody, arguably the Yellow Rail's most important biographer. But of no less interest, we discover the essence of William Burt's ultimate passion—to find the nest of the Yellow Rail.

The final chapters of *Shadowbirds* provide an analogy between the quest for the nest of the rail and the search for the Holy Grail. We find evocative descriptions of research and pursuit, trial and error, with success almost but not quite achieved. Yet, not unlike the quest for the Holy Grail, the reader is left with the sense that should the author triumph in his quest, life might never be the same for him! Could it be that there are some birds, just as there are some things in life, that are simply better sought for than found?

Regardless of your views on philosophy, read William Burt's *Shadowbirds*, for it is a masterpiece of modern nature writing, both from an ornithological perspective and from an aesthetic and literary point of view.

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Birders who attended Birders Day 1994 (cosponsored by the Massachusetts Audubon Society and the Brookline Bird Club) enjoyed an opportunity to experience Burt's enthusiasm and accomplishments first hand through full-screen projections of his extraordinary rail slides and his fascinating narrative of endless search and occasional discovery in the vast marshland habitats of the Black and Yellow rail.