

## EXPERIENCE WITH CLAPPER RAILS IN THE BARNSTABLE GREAT MARSH

by Stauffer Miller

The Clapper Rail reaches the virtual northern limit of its breeding range on the Atlantic Coast in Massachusetts, and the Barnstable Great Marsh on Cape Cod is one of the more important breeding areas in the state for the species. I am fortunate to live only fifteen minutes from the marsh and have therefore been in a favorable location from which to study this rail, one of the state's scarcest and most secretive species.

The Barnstable Great Marsh, located largely in Barnstable, is the largest salt marsh on Cape Cod. It lies just south of the Sandy Neck peninsula and is drained by numerous tributaries of Scorton Creek. The best access is Navigation Road, which is easily reached by exit 5 of Route 6.

From the small parking area at the end of Navigation Road, a walk of about fifteen minutes will put one in the central marsh. Such a walk is not without difficulty, as you must leap across a number of deep ditches. I prefer to enter the marsh at low tide, when the margins of the ditches are more easily seen.

The walker will know when he has reached the central marsh, as the songs of Common Yellowthroats and Song Sparrows are no longer heard. Instead, one hears the asthmatic wheeze of the Sharp-tailed Sparrow and strident cry of the Willet. Seaside Sparrows can also usually be found.

Numerous wide, deep creeks branch in the central marsh. At low tide, these creeks have little water, and soft mud extends halfway up their banks. *Spartina* grass grows partway down the creek banks, and the rails appear to walk in and out of the interface of grass and mud on these banks. At other times they are in thick *spartina* grass that borders numerous salt pannes of the area. The birds are very hard to see in the dim early morning light.

If you can get into the marsh by 5:00 AM anytime from late May to late June, you most likely will hear one or two Clappers. The question is, however, what do you listen for? Both the National Geographic Society and Peterson records have a Clapper Rail vocalization that could be characterized as a repetitive "tick-tick-tick" call, at first slow, then somewhat faster. It was this sound that I was expecting to hear.

But what I noticed during observations made in 1994 and 1995 was a somewhat different sound, which at first confused me because it reminded me of one of the phrases from the King Rail repertoire. The sound is best described as starting with two or three closely repeated tick notes, which quickly move into a rapid slurred ticking. To the best of my knowledge, this vocalization, which I have managed to record, is the principal sound made by Clapper Rails at the Barnstable Great Marsh, and this is what one should be listening for.

I sent the taped rendition of the slurred ticking call to Wayne Petersen of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, and he said that the recording was definitive for a "large rail," i.e., Clapper or King rail. He said that sequence and pattern matched the "hip-hip-hurrah" call of a King Rail but was faster and higher than the latter. Therefore, he thought this was probably a Clapper Rail call, although not one he had heard before.

Both King and Clapper rails can deliver a number of different calls, many of which are advertising and courtship calls. In addition, there are distress and alarm calls, and the slurred ticking described herein may be such a call.

Because it is so difficult to see Clapper Rails in the Barnstable Great Marsh, I have not yet seen a rail actually uttering the slurred ticking call. This is a point of study that remains uncompleted.

If you like the idea of making a long walk at 5:00 AM, leaping deep ditches, and then possibly seeing a shadowy form run along a muddy bank, then this is the outing for you. Seriously, just being in this fine marsh at this early hour is a heady experience that I would recommend to all.

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