



Photograph by Hal H. Harrison

Long legs, long, slender bill, and plainly patterned plumage — all features variously shared by herons, rails, and shorebirds — are characteristics of this month's mystery species. Within the heron tribe, only the Least Bittern, Green Heron, and the night-herons are either small enough or short enough in the upper leg (i.e., tibia) to be possibilities. All the herons can readily be eliminated as identification possibilities by the presence of the distinct black-and-white barring on the flanks and the slender, decurved bill of the mystery bird. Similarly, none of the North American shorebirds have strongly barred flanks like those shown by the mystery species.

Having removed herons and shorebirds as possibilities, we must assume that the mystery bird is some species of rail. Because of the bird's long bill, the stubby-billed Sora and the rare and elusive Yellow and Black rail need not be considered as identification possibilities. This leaves the King, Clapper, and Virginia rail as choices.

All of the latter three rails are quite similar: long, slightly decurved bill; barred flanks; plain breast; and muted brown or olive-gray on the back, lightly streaked with black or brown. In other words, they are tough to tell from a black-and-white photo! In life, one of the key features (besides the great

difference in size) between a King Rail and a Virginia Rail is the presence of a gray face on the much smaller Virginia Rail. Since we can't determine this coloration from the photograph, it is important to look at the overall structure of the bird for possible clues.

Compared with a Virginia Rail, both King and Clapper rails have longer and heavier bills and often appear relatively long-necked, pot-bellied, and more elongated overall, particularly from the legs forward. Although all three species have conspicuously barred flanks, the flank markings of Clapper Rails are wavy and blurry and not nearly as distinct and crisp as those on the browner King and Virginia rail. The clarity and darkness of the flank barring on the mystery rail is by itself enough to eliminate the Clapper Rail as a possibility.

This reduces the choice to one between King Rail and Virginia Rail. Based upon the absence of prominent streaks on the back, the medium-length bill, and the aforementioned structural differences, the evidence points to its being an adult Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*).

Virginia Rails are widespread and relatively common summer residents in many Massachusetts wetlands, particularly those dominated by a healthy growth of cattails and other emergent wetland vegetation. Occasionally, they attempt to overwinter in open brooks along the coastal plain.

(Announcement)

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AT A GLANCE

Photo by Alfred M. Bailey



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