

Black Rail in Greenland, New Hampshire

Matt Tarr

On the morning of May 19, I met with a landowner in the town of Greenland, New Hampshire to discuss wildlife habitat projects he was considering for his property. At eighty acres the property is one of the largest undeveloped areas in the town of Greenland. The combination of pine forest, wetlands, and nearly thirty-five acres of old-field habitat make it a diverse area for wildlife. The landowner's main reason for purchasing the property was to have a place where he and his brothers could hunt deer. Although hunting is still a priority, he has been getting more involved in maintaining the diversity of birds, mammals, and plant species that occur on the property.

We walked the property for about an hour, and around 9:00 a.m. we started looking at the last section of field which was adjacent to a 150-foot-wide wet swale of reed canary grass, cattails, and alders. As we walked through the field I could hear an odd bird call coming from the wet swale. The call was very quiet under the sounds of our talking and walking, but I knew that this was not a call I had ever heard before in the field. Naturally, my interest was piqued. Our path was taking us closer to where the bird was calling from and I was suddenly able to hear the entire call, which was being given about every five seconds: "*keekedr!.... keekedr!*" The words "Black Rail" immediately popped into my head; I had heard this diagnostic call many times on taped recordings. However, almost as quickly as I identified the call, I discounted my identification; this is not a bird that should be anywhere near New Hampshire!

I said nothing to the landowner, and over the next fifteen minutes we walked and talked within hearing distance of the bird, my mind racing the entire time to figure out what bird other than a Black Rail would make such a call. I was preoccupied with the call almost to the point of rudeness, so I finally pointed it out to the landowner and said "you'll have to excuse me, I need to go see what bird is making that call!" At that, I nearly ran to the edge of the wetland and then snuck through the cattails and ankle deep water to within ten feet of the calling bird. Although the bird remained hidden, it was calling loudly, and there was now little doubt in my mind that this was in fact a Black Rail.

I explained to the landowner the rarity of the bird and asked if he would mind if I had a few other birders join me that evening to confirm what I thought I was hearing. He was excited by the idea of a rare bird on his property so he agreed happily. As we left the site, I made a beeline for my truck and nearly tore it apart trying to find a cassette tape with a Black Rail on it. I listened to the call on the tape (which sounded just like the one coming out of the wetland!) and then ran back to try to get a glimpse of the bird. Unfortunately, the air temperature was now around ninety degrees, the bird had stopped calling, and I didn't have a portable tape player.

As soon as I got back to my office I contacted Becky Suomala and Steve Mirick of New Hampshire Audubon. I was able to speak with Steve and he assembled a

small group of experienced birders. We met at the property that evening with tape player and recording equipment in hand. The group ? which included me and Steve, along with Davis Finch, David and Terri Donsker, Mike Resch, and Denny Abbott ? made its way to the edge of the wetland and began broadcasting Black Rail calls. The bird responded within thirty seconds of our first calls, and quickly made its way to us through the marsh. That evening Davis Finch was able to get some great recordings of the bird, and everyone present was able to view the bird at least briefly as it walked through the cattails around us. We were hearing and seeing the first New Hampshire record of Black Rail!

I contacted the landowner that evening and told him that there was in fact a Black Rail on his property. I then explained to him that there would be a lot of birders who would really like to see and hear this bird. His idea of “a lot” was around twenty people. I then carefully explained he could expect many more birders than that! He was hesitant to open the property up to allow people to come and go at their pleasure, but was gracious in allowing organized groups of birders to join me on the property to view the bird.

Between May 19 and May 26 I led five groups of birders to observe the rail. Groups ranged in size from five to as many as seventy birders. Some of the smaller groups were lucky enough to get glimpses of the bird, but it would have been too invasive and disruptive to try to get seventy birders into the wetland; the larger group was at least able to hear the bird calling.

Work commitments did not allow me to check on the presence of the rail the week following May 26. The next day I was able to return was June 2. I broadcast rail calls through all of the wetland areas but couldn't locate the rail. I returned to the property the following week to conduct a bird survey and the rail was absent then as well.

The landowner was happy with the interest that this bird generated for his property. Although he is not quite ready to open the property up to the public, he is considering allowing birding by the public in the future. His long-term plans are to build two houses close together in the opposite corner of the property from where the rail was observed. The remainder of the property will likely be conserved and managed primarily for wildlife habitat and for hunting. The landowner's habitat management goals include maintaining most of the property in an old field/shrub habitat, working with Public Service of New Hampshire to retain shrub cover within the power line easement, maintaining a three-acre alder thicket along the edge of the wetland to encourage woodcock nesting and brooding, and amending an approximately five-acre area of the field to encourage tall grass habitat for bobolinks. All of the mowing on the property will be conducted in late summer and early fall to avoid damage to nests, fledglings, and deer fawns.

Thanks to all who joined us to observe the rail! Your responsible birding will likely result in this wonderful property being open to birders in the near future. 

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Editor's note. And thanks to Matt for his thoughtful handling of the original discovery, its communication to the birding community, and his leadership, which respected both the privacy needs of the landowner and the excitement of many eager birders. I was among the "group of seventy" lined out quietly along the edge of the wetland listening intently. Black Rail remains a "heard bird" on my life list, and although I was almost willing the grasses to move, I was thrilled to share this first state record with so many others who stayed put. As another member of that evening's group remarked on Massbird "It was an experience, in many ways, including the participants. Birders are pretty neat folks. Lots of anticipation and sensory flooding: dynamic skies, greenest of greens, the air full of fresh scents and 'kee kee doo.' not too bad!"



The multitudes assembled in the parking lot of McDonalds in Greenland, NH, under threatening skies, to get the ground rules and directions from Matt.



In single file the excited participants slogged off through the wet grassland.



Listening in rapt concentration to a lost bird in a very unlikely location.



You mean it's hanging around in that tiny patch of wet meadow?

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JAMES GROOM