

THE AUK:

A QUARTERLY JOURNAL OF
ORNITHOLOGY.

VOL. XVII.

JANUARY, 1900.

No. I.

THE LITTLE BLACK RAIL.

BY J. A. ALLEN.

Plate I.

ALTHOUGH the Little Black Rail (*Porzana jamaicensis*) was first made known in 1760, and received its technical christening at the hands of Gmelin in 1788 (Syst. Nat. I, 718), it still remains one of the least known members of its family, and one of the rarest of North American birds in collections. Its entrance into natural history literature was nearly simultaneous in three distinct publications, all dated 1760. Dr. Patrick Browne in his 'Natural History of Jamaica,' gives, on page 479, a brief diagnosis of it in Latin, and adds that this "species has never been described before; it is a very beautiful little bird, and very naturally pictured by Mr. Edwards, in a book with which he intends to favor the public soon."

Mr. Edwards, in his 'Gleanings of Natural History' (Vol. II, 1760, p. 142, pl. 278) describes this little Rail as 'The Least Water-Hen,' and gives of it a very good colored figure. On the same plate is a colored figure of 'The Yellow Wren' (*Dendroica jamaicensis*). He says: "These birds were engraved on the plate immediately from nature, and are both drawn the size of life. The lower bird represents the Water-Hen." And then follows



BLACK RAIL.

PORZANA JAMAICENSIS (Gmel.)

NATURAL SIZE.

W. Verley.
1918

A. Heen & Co. Lithographic, Baltimore

an excellent and very detailed description of it, following which he says: "These birds were brought from the island of Jamaica by Dr. Browne. The Water-Hen is called Biddy-biddy by the natives of the island in imitation of the noise it makes. I believe this bird hath till now been unknown: there is nothing like it in Sloane's Jamaica . . . See Dr. Browne's account of the least Water-Hen in his history of Jamaica, pa. 479."

Brisson's account (*Orn.*, VI, Suppl., p. 140, also dated 1760) is based entirely on Browne and Edwards, as likewise is Gmelin's, who quotes in addition, however, Buffon and Latham, whose accounts are also based on Browne and Edwards. The accounts of Vieillot (*Nouv. Dict. d'Hist. Nat.*, XXVIII, p. 550) in 1819, and Stephens (*Gen. Zoöl.*, XII, pt. 1, p. 221) in 1824, and of other compilers up to 1838, are all based, either directly or at second hand, on Browne and Edwards. In fact, we get no new information respecting this bird till Audubon, in 1838 (*Orn. Biog.*, IV, p. 359, pl. 349), announced it as a bird of the United States, on the basis of specimens sent him by Mr. Titian R. Peale, in October, 1836. These specimens, an adult male and four young, were taken alive July 22, 1836, apparently in some meadows near Philadelphia, and given to Mr. Peale by Dr. Thomas Rowan. Audubon's plate and description were based on these specimens, and his account of its habits on the letters of Mr. Peale and Dr. Rowan, which he published at length.

The gist of the matter is given in Rowan's letter, which shows that he considered it a common bird at the place where he captured his specimens. His letter, addressed "to the Messrs. Peale," as given by Audubon, is worth quoting in full for its historic interest: "On Saturday last I wrote to you of the Rail Bird breeding in this place. I then described one that I caught last summer, which was unlike the Rail in the fall season, and I presumed that all in the wet ground were the same, but this day¹ my men mowing around the pond started up two of the usual kind. The hen flew a few rods, and then flew back to her young in an instant, when they caught her together with her four

¹ This must have been July 22, 1836, judging from Peale's letter to Audubon transmitting Dr. Rowan's.

young, which I herewith send you. Many more can be caught. I have seen them in our meadow every month of the year, but they never make a great noise except when very fat on the wild oat's seed. From the above you will conclude that they do not migrate to the south [= north?], but breed here." From Mr. Peale's letter we learn that the old bird was found, on dissection, to have been "a male, rendering it singularly curious that *he* should have suffered himself to be captured by hand while in defence of the young brood." We also learn that the young died soon after Mr. Peale received them, but that "the old one lived . . . until the 26th of July (four days after its capture), evincing considerable anxiety for the young, as long as they lived."

Mr. Peale also says: "There is now in the Museum [probably Peale's Museum in Philadelphia] a specimen of this species, which has been in the collection for about thirty years, said to have been caught in the vicinity of this city." This is doubtless a record of the earliest known capture of this species in the United States. Mr. Audubon adds: "Since the above was written, I have received a letter from J. Trudeau, M. D., in which he says that his father shot a considerable number of these Rails last winter [probably 1836-37] in the vicinity of New Orleans."

For our next news of this bird we must apparently return to Jamaica. Eighty-seven years after Browne's original discovery of the species, Mr. Philip Henry Gosse, in his 'Birds of Jamaica' (1847, p. 375), says: "A specimen of this little Crake [he calls it the Little Red-eyed Crake] was brought to me in April, alive and unhurt. It lived in a cage two days, but though I enclosed with it a vessel containing water and mud, with aquatic weeds in a growing state, and scattered on it crumbs of bread and pounded corn, it scarcely ate." He describes its manner of walking and its pose, as observed in confinement, and then says: "On two or three occasions, I have seen the species. Near the end of August, pursuing a White Gaulin [or White Heron] in the morasses of Sweet River, several of these little Rails, one at a time, flew out from the low rushes before my feet, and fluttering along for a few yards, with a very laboured flight, dropped in the dense rush again. Their manner of flight, and their figure greatly resem-

bled those of a chicken; the legs hung inertly down. I saw another in February, by the border of the river at the Short Cut, flying with the same feeble and laborious motion from one tuft of herbage to another, whence it would not emerge till almost trodden on." He says he never heard it utter a sound, but quotes from an old manuscript work of a Mr. Robinson, who "in describing two that were brought to him alive in October, 1760 [a date coincident with that of Browne's work already cited!] says, 'their cry was very low, and resembled that of a Coot, when at a great distance'. . . . 'Several,' he observes, 'were killed accidentally, by the negroes at work; as they are so foolish as to hide their heads, and, cocking up their rumps, think they are safe, when they are easily taken.' He [Robinson] says elsewhere, 'The negroes in Clarendon call it *Cacky-quaw*, by reason of its cry, which consists of three articulations; the negroes in Westmorland call it *Johnny Ho*, and *Kitty Go*, for the same reason.'" Mr. W. T. March, in a paper on the birds of Jamaica published in 1864 (Proc. Acad. Nat. Sci. Phila., 1864, p. 69) says: "The cry of this species is *chi chi-cro-croo-croo* several times repeated in sharp, high-toned notes, and heard at a considerable distance." He also states that it is "of frequent occurrence about marshy lands, and on the savannahs and open pastures in the vicinity of water."

With this we will dismiss the early history of the Little Black Rail, and turn to later records for the completion of its life history, taking for our new point of departure Baird, Brewer, and Ridgway's 'Water Birds of North America' (Vol. I, 1884, pp. 377-380). Here Dr. Brewer says: "It is known to occur from the Delaware marshes about Philadelphia southward; and is said to be more common in the West India Islands than with us. . . . It has been found by Mr. Krider breeding about Philadelphia, and its eggs have been obtained." Mr. Ridgway in the same work (p. 378) gives its range as "Temperate North America, north to Massachusetts, Northern Illinois (breeding), Kansas, Oregon, and California; south through Western South America to Chili; Cuba; Jamaica; Bermudas." (As will be more fully noted later, the South American portion of the range should be eliminated.) From Dr. Brewer's account we learn that the Oregon record is based on information imparted to him by Captain

Bendire. Captain Bendire's published record, in full, is as follows: "Seen on two occasions in the swamps near Malheur Lake, where it unquestionably breeds." (Proc. Boston Soc. Nat. Hist., XIX, 1877, p. 143.) Dr. Brewer also cites Mr. H. W. Henshaw, as authority for its occurrence in California, who believes it, on information furnished by Mr. Gruber, "to be rather common in the extensive tule swamps of that State." Mr. E. W. Nelson is Dr. Brewer's authority for its occurrence in Illinois, Mr. J. H. Batty for its capture in northern Connecticut, Mr. H. A. Purdie for its capture at Saybrook, Conn., and Plymouth, Mass., and Major Wedderburn and Mr. Hurdis for its occurrence in the Bermudas. Some of these references will bear amplification and more precise citation, in connection with later records.

In general terms it may be said that the range of the Little Black Rail is now known to extend from Dueñas, Guatemala (Salvin, Ibis, 1866, p. 198) and the West Indies (Jamaica, various records, Cuba, few records) northward in the eastern United States from Florida and Louisiana to Massachusetts, southern Ontario (Dundas marsh, Nash, in McIlwraith, Birds of Ont., 2d ed., p. 122), Ohio, Indiana, and Northern Illinois (various records). There are also records from Minnesota and Nebraska. Further west, there are a number of records from Kansas, two from Texas, one for Arizona, Lake Malheur, Oregon, and various records from California. There are breeding records from Jamaica, the Delaware marshes, Pennsylvania, Cape May County, New Jersey, Connecticut, Illinois and Kansas. The references to its occurrence at various points on the west coast of South America (Peru and Chili) relate to its near ally, *Porzana salinazi*, now recognized as a distinct species. It may therefore be assumed that its range extends northward, wherever there are localities suited to its peculiar needs, from Jamaica to near the northern border of the United States, and that it breeds throughout this range, retiring southward, at least to the more southern parts of the United States, in winter. The fact of its being so little known is doubtless due not so much to its extreme rarity as to its local distribution and peculiarly secretive habits, characteristic of all Rails, but especially emphasized, apparently, in

the present species. Its small size doubtless also aids in its escaping observation and capture. At least all the early records of its capture seem due purely to accident.

In completion of the present history of the species, a few of the more interesting and important later accounts of its capture may be here transcribed. In 1869 Mr. W. P. Turnbull (*Birds of East Penn. and New Jersey*, p. 33) records it as "Rare. It breeds on the marshes of Cape May County, New Jersey." Mr. Stone says "there is a set of eggs in the Collection of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia labeled New Jersey. It may still occur as a rare breeder" (*Birds of Penn. and New Jersey*, 1894, p. 67).

In 1876 Mr. H. A. Purdie recorded a specimen from Clarks Island, Plymouth Harbor, Massachusetts, which was "picked up dead in August, 1869," and also its discovery by Mr. John N. Clark at Saybrook, Conn. Of the latter he says: "Of this species Mr. Clark . . . writes me that a neighbor of his, while mowing at that place, July 10, 1876, swung his scythe over a nest of ten eggs on which the bird was sitting, unfortunately cutting off the bird's head and breaking all but four of the eggs" (*Bull. Nutt. Orn. Club*, II, 1877, p. 22). Eight years later Mr. Clark had the good fortune to discover another nest on "Great Island, a tract of salt meadow near the mouth of the Connecticut River, on its eastern shore," while hunting for nests of the Seaside and Sharp-tailed Finches. This nest was found on the 6th of June, 1884, and contained three fresh eggs. On the 13th of June he again visited the nest and "found therein the full complement of nine eggs." The old bird, however, escaped capture, although Mr. Clark devoted the whole day to this special end, visiting the nest about every half hour. Mr. Clark's very full account of the nest and eggs was published in 'The Auk,' Vol. I, 1884, pp. 393, 394.

On June 19, 1875, Mr. E. W. Nelson found a nest of this species in the Calumet Marshes, in northern Illinois. The nest contained "ten freshly laid eggs," which, with the nest, Mr. Nelson has very carefully described (*Bull. Nutt. Orn. Club*, I, 1876, p. 43; *Bull. Essex Inst.*, VIII, 1877, pp. 134, 135). Mr. H. H. Brimley and Mr. John S. Cairns have reported the Little Black

Rail from North Carolina, the latter as breeding in Buncombe County (O. & O., XIV, Feb., 1889, p. 17). There are various accounts of its breeding in Kansas, where the late Col. N. S. Goss gives it as a rare summer resident, arriving about the middle of March to the first of April, nesting in May, and returning south in October (Birds of Kansas, 1891, p. 142). Its manner of occurrence in Indiana, Illinois, and Ohio has been well summarized by Mr. A. W. Butler in his 'Birds of Indiana' (1897, pp. 679-681).

The Little Black Rail selects for its nesting place, as would be expected, a wet, grassy meadow, either fresh or salt according to whether the locality is in the interior or on the seacoast. Both Mr. Clark and Mr. Nelson have noted its general resemblance to the nest of the Meadowlark, and describe it as "consisting of fine meadow grasses loosely put together, with a covering of the standing grasses woven over it and a passage and entrance at one side" (Clark); or as "composed of soft grass blades, loosely interwoven in a circular manner," and "placed in a deep cup-shaped depression in a perfectly open situation on the border of a marshy spot, and its only concealment was such as a few straggling *carices* afforded" (Nelson). The nest, as in other species, thus appears to vary with locality and the natural surroundings. A full set of eggs appears to number nine or ten, and are said by Mr. Clark to greatly resemble, in size and color, those of the Meadowlark, but to differ in being of a dull white ("creamy white," Mr. Nelson says), instead of clear white, with the spots and markings rather smaller. They average about 1.00 by .80 in. in size. According to Mr. Nelson's experience, the eggs were placed in two layers, owing to the small size of the nest, which had an inside diameter of 3.25 in.

The secretive habits of the Little Black Rail are well illustrated by Mr. Clark's attempt to secure the female, with his set of the eggs of this species. He says: "I devoted the whole day to this special end, and visited the nest about every half hour through the day, approaching it with every possible caution, and having a little tuft of cotton directly over the nest to indicate the exact spot; but although I tried it from every quarter with the utmost diligence and watchfulness, I was never able to obtain

the slightest glimpse of the bird — never perceived the slightest quiver of the surrounding grass to mark her movements as she glided away, and yet I found the eggs warm every time, indicating that she had just left them.”

Plate I accompanying this article, from an excellent drawing by Mr. Fuertes, is a very life-like representation of this rarely seen species. The only previous figures of this species appear to be those published by Edwards in 1760, and by Audubon, in 1838.

THE RUFIOUS HUMMINGBIRDS OF CAPE DISAPPOINTMENT.

BY WILLIAM H. KOBBE'.

CAPE DISAPPOINTMENT, formerly called Cape Hancock, forms the extreme southwestern point of Washington State, and is therefore at the mouth of the Columbia River, which enters the Pacific Ocean near the 46th degree of north latitude. Roughly speaking, this cape is in the form of a crescent and extends about one mile into the ocean, thus enclosing a small bay on the side towards the river. The opposite side receives the full force of the Pacific and is cut by the action of the mighty waves into numerous beaches and rocky headlands. In fact, the entire aspect of the cape is very hilly. At one time, I imagine, these hills formed the backbone of the cape, but they are now washed into cliffs on the ocean side and into precipitous slopes on the other. In one place the ocean seems to have broken through and connected with the bay during former centuries, thus forming a low tract or valley in the center of which a small lake has formed.

The climate of this region is rather unique. The warm oceanic current from Japan, flowing south along the coast, causes a very mild climate, and heavy and incessant rains. These rains are caused by the moisture-bearing winds moving inland from the ocean and being chilled against the Cascade Mountains.