

VOCALIZATIONS OF THE BLACK RAIL (*LATERALLUS  
JAMAICENSIS*) AND THE YELLOW RAIL  
(*COTURNICOPS NOVEBORACENSIS*)

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ONE night in June, 25 years ago, a group of us were listening to the medley of sounds coming from a marsh about 28 km (about 17 miles) south of Ithaca, New York. Suddenly, from not more than 15 meters away, out in the marsh, came a sound that none of us had ever heard before. We paraphrased it, *Tic-tic-tic-McGreer*, recorded it on 35 mm sound film, which we were using at the time, and then began to speculate concerning its identity. Dr. Arthur A. Allen then led some of us into the marsh with flashlights. We caught the briefest glimpse of a bird, which might have been a rail, but we are still interested in identifying the bird.

Some months after we recorded it, we played the sound to the assembled members of the A.O.U. No one offered any suggestions as to its identity. Several years earlier Dr. Allen had found a nest in the marsh at the head of Cayuga Lake that almost certainly was that of a Yellow Rail. Also there had been occasional reports of Yellow Rails in the Cayuga Lake basin during the fall and spring migrations. These observations gave us some reason to believe that the vocalization might be that of the Yellow Rail. About 1952 Mr. Aretas Saunders listened to the recording at Cornell and later wrote that he was quite satisfied that it was a Yellow Rail. In 1958 Dr. Harold Axtell, an able observer of bird song, was consulted concerning the identification and stated that he had heard this song in the field and was quite certain that it was a Yellow Rail. On one occasion, since making the original recording, Dr. Allen and I again heard what we believe to be the same call in a marsh near Paul Smiths, Franklin County, New York. We did not see this bird, nor did we record the call.

In 1959 we published this call in the album, *Field Guide to Bird Songs*, designed to accompany Roger Peterson's *Field Guide to the Birds*, with reasonable confidence that we were correct that it was that of a Yellow Rail. On 13 February 1960 Mr. Chandler Robbins of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service wrote to Roger Peterson in part as follows:

Dear Roger:

I had the pleasure of hearing, a couple of nights ago, part of your *Field Guide to Bird Songs*. On the whole I think it represents a top-notch job of recording and selecting; but one call just about knocked me off my seat.

This was the call identified as a Yellow Rail. It's a perfect reproduction—but if a Yellow Rail did it, I'll eat him raw. This is one of the two calls that we hear in the Black Rail marsh at Elliott Island, Maryland. I must confess that I have never *seen* a Black Rail give the call on the phonograph record, but in years when

we hear the calls we have little trouble (with a group of people) flushing Black Rails from the marsh where the calls are heard. And furthermore, we have never seen a Yellow Rail in that marsh or heard its characteristic clicking call there. . . .

In a way I almost hope that Mr. Robbins is correct and that we have made a mistake in our identification, since it would mean a new species for our check-list in New York's Cayuga Lake basin; also I am not quite sure how this species would taste raw. Contrary to the opinion expressed by Mr. Robbins is that of Mr. Alex Bergstrom as he reviewed *A Field Guide to Bird Songs* in the April 1960 issue of *Bird-Banding*. In part he says, referring to the album: ". . . The Yellow Rail is represented by its second song, generally considered the source of William Brewster's mysterious 'kicker' in eastern Massachusetts, rather than by the ticking notes considered typical of the species in its centers of abundance as a breeding bird in Canada."

For the last several years Mr. Joseph Hagar, formerly state ornithologist of Massachusetts, has been making a concentrated effort to identify definitely the vocalizations of the Black and Yellow rails. It is to his effort that we owe much of the renewed interest in the subject today. In 1959 Mr. Hagar visited Cornell in order to hear the recording that we thought was the Yellow Rail. He was disappointed, and, while he could not identify the sound, he was quite certain that it could not be a Yellow Rail. Mr. Hagar took with him a copy of our recording and later that year, in a New Brunswick, Canada, marsh, known as a breeding place for Yellow Rails, believes he heard this same sound.

On 13 May 1960 Mr. Hagar called me from New Jersey and said that the Black Rails were calling. Could I come down and record them? We went in haste with our equipment, and, that same evening in a salt marsh near Dividing Creek, New Jersey, known as Wier Creek Landing, Mr. Hagar pointed out the sound and in clear, quiet moonlight (temperature 15°C), we recorded the calls (Cornell Cat., Cut 1), which I paraphrased as *Kic-kic-kerr* and which we believed to be the Black Rail. The bird was not seen. At this time we recorded 4 min 55 sec of edited sounds. We could hear several other birds giving the same call in the marsh. We played back the recording to the calling birds at least three times, and each time the birds stopped calling for a long period. The moon was rising, and as it got brighter around midnight, the bird seemed to call less. Around noon the next day (14 May) in the same area, we heard a short succession of *kic-kic-kic's* much like the first two notes recorded the evening before, but again we did not see any bird. The following evening, at the same spot where we had recorded the previous night, Mr. Hagar and his assistants surrounded and captured the bird believed to have made this sound. This bird proved to be a male Black Rail. On 8 June the

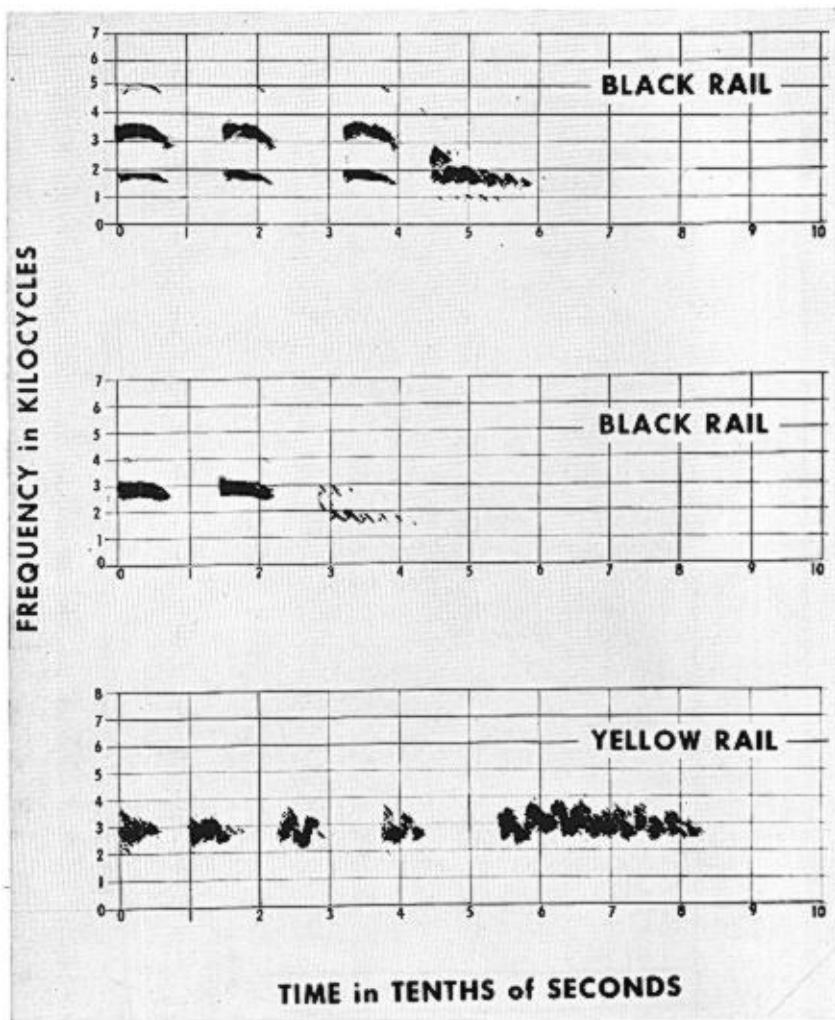


Figure 1

writer, Randolph S. Little, Charles A. Sutherland, Warren Y. Brockelman, and Mr. Hagar converged on the marsh at Dividing Creek, New Jersey, in the hope that we could hear and record a second and different call of the Black Rail, possibly the female that Mr. Hagar believed might be heard later in the season. We heard very little sound that we could attribute to Black Rails and nothing new. On 10 June we drove to Elliott Island, Maryland, and that evening at 22:30, in fair weather (temperature 15°C), we heard in addition to the *Kic-kic-kerr* call, which we had recorded, a new call that we paraphrased as *Kic-kic-kic-kerr*. The bird

changed from the four-note call to the three-note call as we approached. This bird, while calling, was driven from the marsh, and Mr. Hagar picked it up. It, too, proved to be a male Black Rail.

In conclusion, this is about the extent of my knowledge of the calls of the Black and the Yellow rails. It is hoped that someone who reads this paper will be able to clear up some of the uncertainty that still seems to exist. Personally, I am beginning to believe that our limited ability to remember and describe sounds or depict them graphically on the printed page so that others can understand them is the root of our difficulty.

Figure 1 presents three spectrograms, two of the Black Rail and one of the call we believe came from a Yellow Rail. The plot of frequency against time appears to show more differences than similarities.

The recordings of the bird calls discussed above are in the Library of Natural Sounds of the Laboratory of Ornithology at Cornell University and are available to serious students who wish to study them further.

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