Rediscovery of the Sooty Rail (*Porzana tabuensis*) in American Samoa

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The Sooty Rail (*Porzana tabuensis*) is widely distributed in the Pacific, but in American Samoa has been found only on the island of Ta'ū. This population was discovered in 1923 when 10 specimens were taken (Murphy 1924), but it has not been recorded since (Banks 1984). No Sooty Rails were found on Ta'ū during a survey conducted in 1975–1976 (Amerson et al. 1982: 64), and, as a result, it was believed to be extirpated (Muse and Muse 1982: 83). United States Fish and Wildlife Service biologists rediscovered this bird in 1985–1986, when they spent 8 days surveying birds on Ta'ū.

On 27 June 1985 Engbring found a fresh, road-killed Sooty Rail on a dirt side road about 1 km east of Ta'ū Village on the northwest side of the island. We heard or saw at least three more individuals in July 1986, all near the main road within 2 km of where the specimen was found. The birds were located by their soft but rather distinctive chattering calls. One was viewed briefly as it scooted across a small path, but only after we made considerable effort to flush it.

The 1985 specimen was deposited at the Bernice P. Bishop Museum (BPBM 161855). Its external measurements (mm) were: tail, 39; wing chord, 74; exposed culmen, 16.9; and tarsus, 24.6. After comparing its plumage with other specimens in the collection, we determined the bird was an adult. The skull was fully ossified. The bird was crushed when killed, and it was impossible to determine the sex internally. Culmen and tarsus measurements, when compared with those of other *P. tabuensis* collected in Samoa (Amadon 1942), suggest it is a female. The short chord measurement indicates that the specimen belongs to the short-winged population, *P. t. tabuensis*, found in Tonga, Fiji, Niue, and Samoa (Banks 1984).

Biologists with the Whitney South Sea Expedition found the Sooty Rail on Ta'ū in marshy habitat on the northwest side of the island (Banks 1984). The rails that we found in 1985–1986 were also in the northwest portion of the island; they occupied rank grass and weed patches in semi-open agricultural forest. We did not find any marsh or reeds here, though there were densely vegetated swales where puddles formed after rains.

The population of Sooty Rails on Ta'ū has evidently never been large and may be confined to the northwest portion of the island. Residents of Ta'ū did not recognize the bird we salvaged and thought it was a young Purple Swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*), a relatively common and well-known bird on Ta'ū. The rails that we found were associated with habitat created by subsistence agriculture, an activity that has diminished over the last several decades on Ta'ū. The decrease in subsistence agriculture, along with a possible loss of wetland habitat, probably has decreased Sooty Rail numbers on Ta'ū.

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