

Another Chapter in the "Ornithological Mystery Story"

Richard C. Bollinger* and Emmerson Bowes**

The title would now seem to be merely provocative, for there is (apparently) no longer any mystery associated with the "ornithological mystery" song whose origins have been a source of controversy for nearly seventy years. Many readers may not be aware, however, that the matter has essentially been settled in recent years—although unsatisfactory aspects remain—and a recent experience of the authors which is related to the issue leads us to believe that a summary of the situation and a few comments may be of interest.

The song is of course the "kik-kik-kik-ki-quèeah" song, sometimes referred to as the "kicker" song, first described by Brewster in 1901 in an article (Brewster, 1901) in which he called it an "ornithological mystery", for he was unable to find or identify the marsh bird which sang it, although he thought it to be the Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*). The Brewster paper is also given in Peterson, 1957, a more accessible source.) How the mystery shortly seemed to be "solved" and the "kicker" song accepted as a song of the Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) is indicated in Bent's account (Bent, 1926) of this bird in which he notes that J. H. Ames had positively identified the song (Ames, 1902) from a bird he had in captivity. In subsequent years recordings of the song were made, and a number of authorities (but not all) were satisfied that the singer was the Yellow Rail, although the singer and the song were never perceived simultaneously.

It was not then until 1959 when this song was published as that of the Yellow Rail in the album *Field Guide to Bird Songs* that attention was again focused on the "kicker" song and dissenting opinion, which had never been absent, appeared. In particular, it was again thought by some that the song was definitely not that of the Yellow Rail, and was probably given by the Black Rail (Kellogg, 1962). The matter was still unresolved in 1966 when George B. Reynard and Stephen T. Harty (Reynard and Harty, 1968),

investigating an occurrence of the "kicker" song, were able after some desperate measures to actually capture what they were sure was the singer, which proved to be a male Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*)!

In view of the preceding, and the fact that the "kicker" song is in any case so seldom heard (almost inexplicably so), a recent observation seems important both as another chapter of the "mystery" saga, and because it corroborates the experience of Reynard and Harty. About 9:30 a.m. on May 13, 1972 we were birding along a marshy section of the Erie Bay shore of the peninsula which constitutes Presque Isle State Park at Erie, Pennsylvania when we heard from about twenty feet what we quickly recognized as the "kicker" song. Fortunately, we happened to have along a tape recorder on which we had prerecorded the rail section from the Bird Songs album, and we turned at once to the appropriate section and began to play the "kicker" song (It might be noted that the recorder was inexpensive and the reproduction could only charitably be described as fair; as others have noted as well, reproduction of a song need not be precise in all respects to elicit a response.) No sooner had we begun than movements in the vegetation indicated that the singer was coming almost directly toward us and in ten or fifteen seconds, there, literally at our feet, was a Virginia Rail, rushing agitatedly back and forth and giving the "kicker" song! As soon as we turned off the recorder, the rail started to make its way back into the marsh, although not in an alarmed way, indeed, it seemed virtually indifferent to our presence throughout. Since it continued to give the song, we thought a repeat performance worth a try, and when the taped song was replayed the rail again came immediately to our feet, wandering away again as soon as the recorded ver-

*4212 Sassafras Street, Erie, PA, 16508

**4149 Neptune Street, Erie, PA, 16506

sion ceased. So far as we know, this is the first time the "kicker" song has been noted in this area, and we should emphasize that at the time this took place we were not aware of the Reynard-Harty paper and fully expected—hoped—that the bird coming into view would be a Yellow Rail.

Reynard and Harty raise some natural questions related to the "kicker" song (why is it so rare?, what is its purpose?), but they clearly feel the identity of the singer has been completely established and the "mystery" definitively solved. Although our own experience was certainly equally absolute, we feel there remain a few aspects sufficiently unsatisfying to raise the question of whether the matter is yet closed, after all. For example, might it be possible that the Yellow Rail actually does give this song, but that an occasional Virginia Rail does also (occasionally)? Or perhaps the Black Rail, which has often been flushed (without mention of the Virginia Rail) in an area where this song was being given. That is, the Virginia Rail is relatively numerous enough that if the "kicker" song is only given by the Virginia, the rarity of the song would seem to imply that it is given only under rather incredibly special circumstances. Also,

although a number of experienced observers long felt that the song was not given by the Yellow Rail, others equally experienced felt that it was. We have two independent proofs now that the Virginia Rail does give it, but no proof that no other rail does not (and indeed will never have such proof—only negative evidence—if in fact no other rail ever gives this song). And again, what about the paper of Ames, the identification of the song from a captive bird? It seems at least possible that the "ornithological mystery" is not completely solved after all, and that one or more chapters might yet remain to be added.

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A Black-capped Petrel north of Bermuda/R. G. B. Brown*

On April 9, 1973 the Canadian Survey Ship "Baffin" was in the Gulf Stream at 37°57'N 62°30'W, enroute from Bermuda to Halifax N.S. The weather was clear and sunny, with the wind NW at 30 knots. A fairly large petrel crossed our bows, heading northwest; it was in view for about a minute, and at its closest was c. 100 yards from the ship.

The upper surface plumage pattern showed a small area of black on the crown; the rest of the head and the neck were white; the back and wings were medium brown, possibly darker on the primaries; the rump and most of the tail were white, but there was a narrow dark band on the upper surface of the tail, near the tip. The underparts appeared to be all white, except for a narrow dark border on the underside of the wings. The bird flew with little flapping in a fast glide, with a swoop-and-soar motion which, at its highest, was about 30 feet above the sea.

The plumage pattern at first suggested a Greater Shearwater, *Puffinus gravis*, but the white on head, neck and rump was far too extensive; the

dark area on the crown was far too small, and could only be seen with difficulty. The only other Atlantic species which fits this description is the Black-capped Petrel *Pterodroma hasitata*, in particular, the subspecies *P. h. hasitata*, which breeds in small numbers on Hispaniola, and possibly elsewhere in the Caribbean (Palmer 1962).

There have been several recent sightings of Black-capped Petrels in the Atlantic; Morzer Bruyns (1967) saw several off the coast of Florida in September 1966, one was seen off the Carolinas in October 1972 (*Am. Birds* 27: 41), and a dead bird was found in Florida in June 1972 (*Am. Birds* 26: 847). This Gulf Stream bird seems unusually far north, considering that the breeding season on Hispaniola probably extends into April (Palmer 1962).

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*Canadian Wildlife Service, Marine Ecology Laboratory, Bedford Institute, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, Canada.