

The Light-footed Clapper Rail: an update

Recent surveys give reduced estimates
of Southern California populations

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A PRELIMINARY REPORT on the Light-footed Clapper Rail, *Rallus longirostris levipes*, estimated a population of 500-750 birds in California (Wilbur, *Am. Birds* 28:868-870, 1974). Since then, additional work has been accomplished, most notably: (1) an intensive study of Carpinteria Marsh, Santa Barbara County, 1976-1977 (Basham); (2) a series of winter high tide counts at Anaheim Bay, Orange County, 1975-1977 (Massey, C. Collins, J. Lindell, M. Silbernagle); and (3) a detailed investigation of the rail population of Tijuana Slough, San Diego County, 1973-1974 (Jorgensen). These, plus short-term studies by the authors and K. Bender, D. Pinkler, P. Johns, and S. Lockhart, have shown that the original estimate was unrealistic. A more probable winter total is 300 rails, distributed as described below.

Santa Barbara County — In 135 field days at *Carpinteria Marsh*, Basham recorded only 17 observations of clapper rails; the population is estimated at ten birds. At *Goleta Slough*, no clapper rails were seen or heard on 33 visits by Basham in 1976-1977, one visit by Jorgensen in 1977, and six visits by D. Pinkler in 1975 (unpub. report, Humboldt State University). If there are clapper rails there, the population is very small.

Ventura County — There may be a few clapper rails in the *Mugu Marshes*, but there have been no reports since 1971. Basham surveyed portions of the area on 27 days in 1976 and 1977; personnel of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California Department of Fish and Game, and Pacific Missile Range have also made periodic searches, with negative results.

Orange County — The preliminary estimate of 200 clapper rails at *Anaheim*



A Light-footed Clapper Rail at Upper Newport Bay, California. Photo/S. R. Wilbur.

Bay was based on actual counts of over 100 birds in the 1950s, and on regular sight and sound observations in the 1960s. However, high tide counts in 1975, 1976, and 1977 were 22, 35, and 40 rails, respectively. Winter high tides flood much of the rail habitat, and a large proportion of the rails present are seen. The total population may include as many as 60 clapper rails. There has obviously been a decline since the late 1960s, but the reasons for this decline are not known.

Upper Newport Bay appears to have an expanding clapper rail population, possibly because of improving habitat conditions as abandoned salt evaporation ponds become revegetated. On one survey in winter of 1977-1978, 60 clapper rails were observed (P. Johns, pers. comm.); the total population may comprise 75 birds.

San Diego County — Massey heard a clapper rail calling at *Agua Hedionda*

Lagoon in 1976, and three were seen at *San Elijo Lagoon* in 1972 (R. Jurek, pers. comm.). Other surveys in these areas have failed to reveal clapper rails, and we do not know if these were transient birds or representatives of very small resident populations. *Los Penasquitos Lagoon* formerly had a small population of clapper rails, but no rails were found there during visits in 1974 (Jorgensen), 1975 (K. Bender), and 1977 (Jorgensen). The marsh has been very dry the past five years, and rail habitat has deteriorated.

JORGENSEN FOUND 12 RAILS in the remnant marsh at *Mission Bay* in November 1977; this was thought to be a total count, as the area was inundated by a flood tide. The six small marshes in *South San Diego Bay* had an estimated five rails in November and December 1977, and *Tijuana Slough* had at least 99 birds (Jorgensen). In previous years, more birds were found in the Bay marshes and fewer in Tijuana Slough. It may be that there is some population interchange between these two areas. The combined total is estimated at 125 rails.

In Baja California, Mexico, Light-footed Clapper Rails are found at Estero de Punta Banda and at Bahia de San Quintin (Massey, *Western Birds* 8:67-70, 1977). The habitat at Estero de Punta Banda is limited, but there are still extensive marshes at San Quintin, and there may be several hundred clapper rails there. No surveys have been made of these Mexican populations.

Important steps are being taken to preserve and restore southern California salt marshes, and the Light-footed Clapper Rail should benefit from these actions. Unfortunately, marshlands are also being destroyed or degraded, so the bird is still truly an Endangered Species.

— U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, 1190 E. Ojai Avenue, Ojai, CA 93023 (Wilbur); 3570 Glade Street, San Diego, CA 92115 (Jorgensen); 1825 Knoxville Avenue, Long Beach, CA 90815 (Massey); 321 Redondo Court, Stockton, CA 95207 (Basham).