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The “kicker” song – new synthesis of an old mystery

The supposed rarity of this song, and its function, remain as subjects of controversy.

Tim Manolis

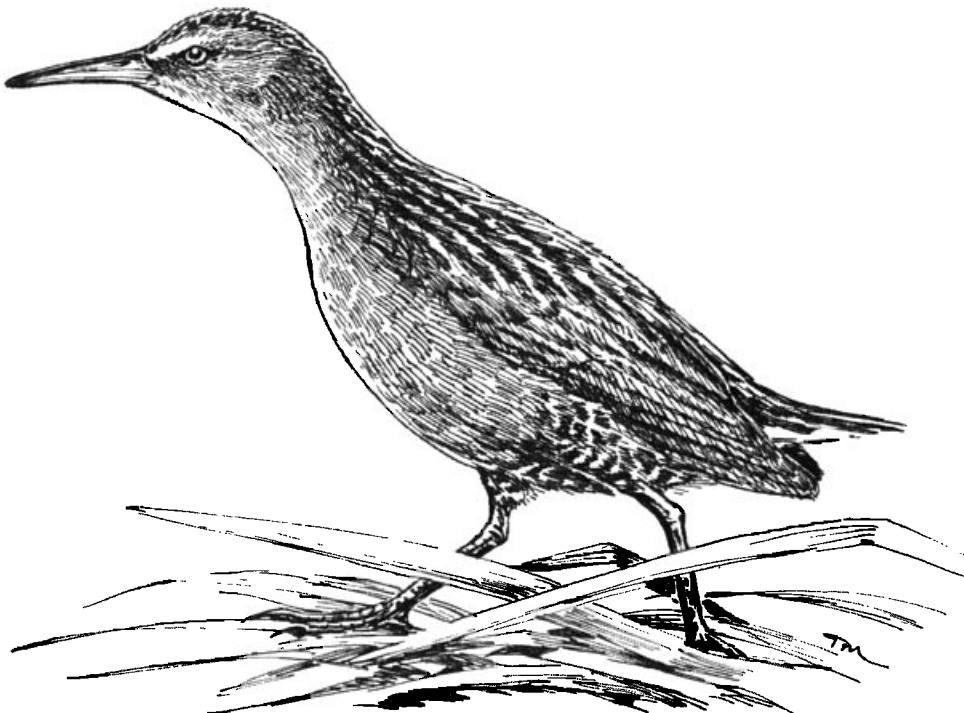
SLOWLY BUT SURELY, what began as an “ornithological mystery” (Brewster 1901) has evolved into a fascinating tale. It is a tribute to the mysterious ways of its perpetrators that they remained so long unidentified. But whereas their identities seem safely established, their motives remain unclear. Hopefully this paper will shed further light on these matters.

To briefly recapitulate, Brewster (1901) heard the “song” of an unidentified marsh bird that sounded to him like “kik-kik-kik-ki-queeah.” He tentatively guessed that the singer might be the Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*), but shortly thereafter, Ames (1902) claimed

to have heard the song from a Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*), held in captivity. Kellogg (1962) rediscovered the “kicker,” which he paraphrased as “tic-tic-tic-McGreer,” and obtained a recording of it. The mystery was subsequently solved, and the singer of the song recorded by Kellogg was identified as the Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) (Reynard and Harty 1968, Callin 1968, Bollinger and Bowes 1973).

Most recently, Bailey (1977) observed that the Clapper Rail (*Rallus longirostris*) has a song very similar in form to that of the “kicker.” While conducting a survey of Black Rails in the San Francisco Bay area of California for the Cali-

fornia Department of Fish and Game, I independently made the same discovery. However, I soon found that neither Bailey nor I had really discovered anything new at all. It seems that these calls of the Clapper Rail have been variously described as “kek(-kek-kek)-burr” (Tomlinson and Todd 1973) or “kek(-kek-kek)-hurrah” (Smith 1974). Smith discerned what he termed “kek-burr” and “kek-hurrah” calls, but indicated that they differed only in pitch and volume. A nearly identical call, “kik-kik(-kik)-kurr” (Meanley 1969) is given by the King Rail (*Rallus elegans*). Even Kellogg was aware of this call, which he likened to the phrase “hip-hip-hurrah” (record



Virginia Rail (Rallus limicola). Drawing by Tim Manolis

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH — South Polar Skua, *Catharacta maccormicki*, photographed at Palmer Station, Antarctica, by Joseph R. Jehl, Jr. The pale golden-buff plumage of the head and neck of this light-phase skua, a field mark that distinguishes it from the dark-headed Great Skua, *Catharacta skua* of the northern hemisphere, is beautifully illustrated here. Both skuas have been reported off both coasts of North America, this one more often and more reliably in the Pacific.