

Spotted Rail, Brant, and Yellow-breasted Crake—records from the Yucatan

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THE FOLLOWING SIGHTINGS WERE made by the authors while birding on the Yucatan Peninsula, Mexico, in February 1983. This second sight record of the Spotted Rail (*Pardirallus maculatus*), near Coba, Quintana Roo, fills in another gap in the known, seemingly disjunct, range of this species. The range extends from the West Indies through Central and South America. Also discussed are sight records of Brant (*Branta bernicla*), which was seen near Celestun, Yucatan, for the first record for the east coast of Mexico, and of the Yellow-breasted Crake (*Porzana flaviventer*), observed also near Coba, Quintana Roo. This represents the fifth published location for this species in Mexico.

SPOTTED RAIL. Two Spotted Rails were observed at 5 p.m., February 25, 1983, on the northeast end of a freshwater lake adjacent to the archeological ruins near Coba, Quintana Roo. A single Spotted Rail was observed preening at the same location at 12 noon the following day. All observations were made approximately 200 meters south of the gate to the archeological ruins on the east side of the lake. The rails were seen in cattails (*Typha*, sp.) from 10 to 15 meters. The February 25 sightings of the birds moving through the vegetation were limited to brief observations with binoculars. The February 26 sighting was of 20 minutes duration with binoculars and a 25x spotting scope as the bird preened in almost full view in an opening in the vegetation. The rails were nearly the size of Clapper Rails (*Rallus longirostris*) and were generally similar to the illustration of the Spotted Rail in Peterson and Chalif

(1973), with the exception of the back pattern, which was more spotted than streaked. The white spots on the back indicated that this was of the Central American race, *P. m. insolitus*, discussed by Parkes *et al.* (1978), rather than the more streak-backed South America race, *P. m. maculatus*, portrayed in Peterson and Chalif (1973). The clucking vocalization described by Bond (1979) was heard during the evening observation February 25, but not during the mid-day observation the following day.

Mark Kasprzyk and Kelly Fleming located several Spotted Rails in this same lake March 31-April 2, 1983, with a high count of nine calling adults including one pair with four young. The rails were visible at all times of the day but were most vocal in the morning. Photographs of the adults and young were taken and tape-recordings were made of the calls. The weather was clear at the time of these sightings, but it had rained the day before.

Two other birders, Michael Middleton and Mzia Chatara, visited this same area June 14, 1983, in rainy weather. At 2:30 p.m., at approximately the same lake location, they observed two adult and one dark-phase juvenile Spotted Rails for 5 minutes at a distance of 6 meters. Photographs were taken and, although not of high quality owing to poor light conditions, diagnostic field marks were discernible. The juvenile bird was nearly the same size as the adult it was following, but much darker, without any brightly-colored field marks. The bird was mottled dark brown, with a dark bill. The adult probed with its bill along the shoreline, occasionally swimming into shallow water where it would tip-up and flap its wings. The immature loosely followed within about 1 meter of the adult.

The young bird observed by Middleton

and Chatara in mid-June resembled the dark-phase juvenile Spotted Rail taken in November, in Veracruz, as described by Dickerman and Haverschmidt (1971). These dates indicate an extended nesting season in Mexico for this species, possibly dependent on local weather conditions.

The Spotted Rail was first recorded from Mexico in 1945 near Tuxtla, Guiterrez, Chiapas (Friedman 1947). This species is described as "extremely rare" in Mexico by Peterson and Chalif (1973). However, based on records from seven Mexican states: Chiapas, Guerrero, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Puebla, Veracruz (Parkes *et al.*) and now twice in Quintana Roo, its status is perhaps better defined as widespread but elusive. Our observations on the Yucatan Peninsula follow the prediction of Birkenholz and Jenni (1964) that this elusive species "will prove to have a fairly continuous range in suitable habitat throughout the Caribbean slope of Middle America." The nearest known occurrence of this species to the Yucatan sightings (see this issue), is an isolated population of the nominate race, *P. m. maculatus*, about 500 kilometers north-east, in Cuba (Bond 1979). The nearest known population of *P. m. insolitus*, on mainland Mexico, is about 600 kilometers southwest in Chiapas. The present sighting was at approximately the same latitude as the northernmost east coast record of this species in Mexico at Tecolutla, Veracruz, 1000 kilometers west. With the exception of two extraordinary records from central Texas and western Pennsylvania, the northernmost sighting of this species is near San Blas, Nayarit, on the west coast of Mexico. A thorough discussion of its range and taxonomic status, including the extralimital records from the United States, is found in Parkes *et al.* (1978).

BRANT. A single adult Brant of the dark, west coast race, *B. b. nigricans*, was observed throughout the morning (9 a.m.-12 noon) on February 23, on a mud-flat in a large, shallow, brackish, mangrove-lined lagoon near Celestun on the west coast of Yucatan, Mexico. The Brant was observed at 30 meters through binoculars and a 25× spotting scope from a boat. It was observed both resting and flying and was loosely associated with numerous waterfowl, predominantly Lesser Scaup (*Aythya affinis*) as well as American Coot (*Fulica americana*) shorebirds, egrets, cormorants and gulls. Also in the lagoon were several thousand Greater Flamingos (*Phoenicopterus ruber*).

The Brant is previously unrecorded from the east coast of Mexico. Bond (1956) considers the 1876 record of the Brant from the island of Barbados in the West Indies (Bent 1951) to be unsatisfactory but believes that it may occur at times in the West Indies. The route that this bird used to arrive in Yucatan can only be speculated upon. The west coast race, *B. b. nigricans*, does occur as a straggler along the east coast of North America (Kortright 1967). Brant, presumably of the east coast race, *B. b. hrota*, also occasionally winter in small numbers as far south as the southern tip of Florida which is approximately 1000 kilometers northeast of the present sighting (Kushlan *et al.* 1982). On the west coast of Mexico, *B. b. nigricans* now winters in Baja, California, and in the states of Sonora and Sinaloa on the mainland. It has been extending its wintering range south in recent years with sightings as far south as Acapulco, Guerrero, which is about 1400 kilometers southwest of the present sighting (Saunders and Saunders 1981). This increase in the number of Brant wintering in Mexico, with a decline in the number wintering in California, may be related to a continued buildup in human activities on the California coast as well as a serious decline of eelgrass (*Zostera*, sp.), an important Brant food item, which occurred about 1940, the same time that Brant began wintering in Mexico (Bellrose 1976; Moffitt 1941, 1943; Saunders and Saunders 1981).

YELLOW-BREASTED CRAKE. A single crane was observed February 26 at 8 a.m., at the same lake near Coba, where the previously described Spotted

Rails were sighted. The crane was observed for 30 minutes as it walked on lily pads (*Nymphaea*, sp.) and fed between the shoreline and a stand of cattails and bulrush (*Scirpus*, sp.). The crane was observed through binoculars from 5-10 meters. Feeding in full view near the crane were four Ruddy Crakes (*Laterallus ruber*), and a Sora (*Porzana carolina*). The high visibility of rails on this date (a total of seven Ruddy Crakes, one Yellow-breasted Crane, one Sora and one Spotted Rail were seen), could be related to the heavy rains of the previous night that may have forced these normally secretive birds into more open areas.

No vocalizations were heard from the crane. Because the bird was constantly moving, photographs of it are blurred but collectively show diagnostic field marks. The tiny crane was slightly more than one-half the size of the nearby Sora. It resembled the illustration in Peterson and Chalif (1973) except that the sides of the breast were buff in color rather than the golden-yellow illustrated on the plate. In addition, the barring on the sides was slightly less bold than portrayed. Based on Dickerman and Warner (1961) the race occurring in Mexico is *P. f. woodi*.

The Yellow-breasted Crane was first recorded in Mexico in 1958 at Tecolutla, Veracruz (Dickerman and Warner 1961). This species is very local in Mexico, reported only from near Acapulco, Guerrero, on the west coast, Tecolutla and Dos Amates in Veracruz and at Laguna Lagartos on the Guatemalan border of Chiapas (Dickerman 1971), approximately 600 kilometers southwest of our sighting. The nearest known occurrence of this species to the Yucatan sighting is about 500 kilometers northeast, in Cuba (Bond 1979). The race in Cuba is *P. f. gossii* (Ripley 1977).

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