

NOTES

PROBABLE BLACK RAIL NESTING RECORD FOR ALAMEDA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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Despite numerous occurrences of the Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*) in central coastal California, there is still no documented nesting record for the species in the State north of Ventura County (Wilbur 1974). Because nearly all historical records of Black Rails in central California have been in fall or winter months, certain authorities (Bent 1926, AOU 1957) have stated or implied that the species winters north of its breeding range.

The large egg collection of the late Henry A. Snow, formerly housed at the Snow Museum in Oakland, was transferred to the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology by the Oakland Museum in 1976. While recently curating this collection, I found a set of eggs taken by Snow on 10 April 1911 at Newark, Alameda Co., California. Snow identified the eggs as belonging to the "Little Yellow Rail." The data slip accompanying the set also bears the AOU number, 215, of the Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*).

Snow noted on the data slip that the species identity was "Certain," but this was a routine designation by many collectors of the period, regardless of the method of identification (Storer 1930). On the basis of their appearance and on grounds of geographical probability, I have concluded that Snow's "Yellow Rail" eggs are actually those of a Black Rail.

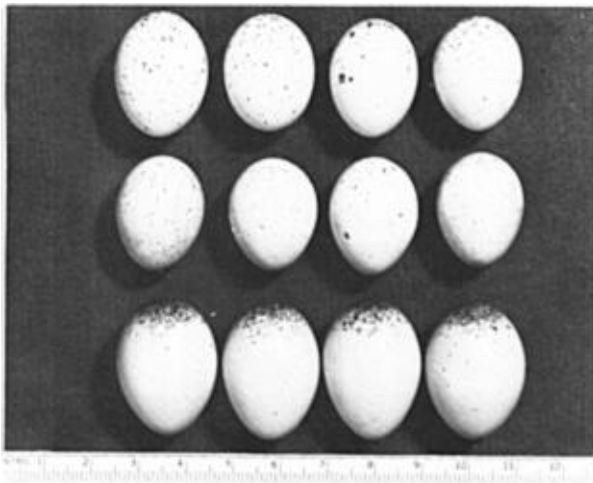


Figure 1. Eggs taken by Snow at Newark, Alameda Co., California on 10 April 1911 (middle row) compared with eggs of the Black Rail (above) and the Yellow Rail (below). Scale is in centimeters.

Photo by Sam Sumida

NOTES

There were originally eight eggs in the set, but incubation was so advanced that the collector was able to prepare only four of them. The remaining eggs are white with tiny spots of reddish brown and medium brown liberally sprinkled over their entire surfaces, but slightly concentrated at the larger ends. They are ovate and slightly glossy. One egg is cracked, and two are heavily nest stained. The eggs measure 25.53 x 19.10, 24.39 x 18.88, 24.58 x 18.53, and 24.36 x 18.60 mm. The set is No. 99670 in the Western Foundation of Vertebrate Zoology collection.

In size, color, shape and texture these eggs agree with the description Bent (1926) gave of California Black Rail (*Lateralus jamaicensis coturniculus*) eggs, and they cannot be distinguished from the eggs in 26 sets of that race in the WFVZ collection.

In contrast, the eggs of the Yellow Rail are a distinctive "rich, warm buff," and their superficial markings are generally confined to a wreath of fine spots of "pale sepia or bright cinnamon" around the large end of the egg (Peabody in Bent 1926). All of the eggs in the Snow set are smaller than the extreme measurements Bent gave for 32 Yellow Rail eggs.

The nest containing the eggs was stated to have been "placed in the dry matted salt grass about ¼ of a mile up from the marsh; in fact it was almost pasture land. Nest under one of those salt bushes on side of little trail. . ." These details are similar to those described by Ingersoll (1909) and Huey (1916) for Black Rail nests in San Diego County. The Yellow Rail breeds only in fresh water marshes (Ripley 1977), and in California it is known to have nested only in Mono Co., east of the Sierra Nevada, occurring in coastal salt marshes only in winter (Small 1974).

Wheelock (1920) stated that the "Black Rail nests in the marshes at Alviso" (Santa Clara Co., California), but did not provide further details. This statement was evidently discounted or overlooked by Grinnell and Miller (1944), since they did not mention it. The occurrence of juvenile Black Rails at Manzanita, Marin Co., on 11 August 1929 (Kibbe 1929) and at Golden Gate Park, San Francisco Co., on 9 August 1945 (Orr 1947), and the recent confirmation of the presence of the species in several central California marshes during March-May 1977 (Manolis 1978), strongly suggest that it may be a long overlooked breeding resident of central California.

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