

Black Rail
1 Oct 1925
Sigourney, IA
E. D. Nauman
Nauman 1927

Record Number: 81-FO
Classification: NA

REFERENCES

Nauman, E.D. 1927. Notes on the rails. Wilson Bull.
39:219-220.

DuMont 1933

VOTE (1981): 2-III, 4-IV, 1-V

IV, not quite enough description for III.

IV, data few but suggestive.

IV, Wilson Bull account (op cite) -- a glimpse. Not found
after hunting. No description.

III, Possibly should be V, as at this date possibility of
young rail of other species (DuMont's comment).

Creciscus jamaicensis stoddardi Coale. Black Rail

Very rare. Anderson (1907) recorded several occurrences of this species in Iowa as follows: "County records: Blackhawk—'rare migrant; one specimen mounted' (Walters). Des Moines—'Burlington, Iowa, 1892—specimen in flesh examined by me' (Nutting, Proc. Iowa Acad. Sci., 1892, 41). Lee—'very rare—Keokuk district' (Praeger). Linn—'a set of eggs was found by myself in 1899, too far incubated to save' (Berry). Van Buren—'some 17 or 18 years ago a farmer caught one with his hands while plowing in a swamp and brought it to me. This is the only time I have known it to occur here—Hillsboro' (W. G. Savage). Webster—'rare; July 11, 1899, killed a small rail of some sort new to me, along the edge of the slough in Black's field just east of the rendering works (Fort Dodge). It is 5½ inches in length; dark slate on head and breast, back dark brown tinging to a reddish at back of neck' (Somes)." The specimen mounted by Walters has been examined by the writer and found to be an adult Yellow Rail. There is no evidence that the specimen examined by Nutting was preserved. Widmann (1907) ^{from Cooke 1885} recorded that one was seen at Iowa City, Johnson County, October 11, 1885.

There are but two recent observations, both by E. D. Nauman of Sigourney. He records (Wilson Bull., XXXIV, pp. 217-19) one seen May 5, 1914 as it flew from the marsh grass within four or five feet of him. Nauman said in a letter that this bird was distinctly a rail, black, and too small for any other species. At that time of year it could hardly have been the young of any other species of rail. Another was seen by him at Sigourney, October 1, 1925. The writer has been unable to find an Iowa specimen.

The only basis for considering the Black Rail as a breeding bird in Iowa is the statement by George H. Berry that he took a set of eggs in Linn County in 1899. Some question has arisen recently in regard to the veracity of several of Berry's records. Therefore it seems advisable, as the eggs were neither preserved nor examined by a trained ornithologist, to remove this species from the list of Iowa breeding birds.

DuMont 1933
p 63

On April 16, 1921, we had one of those erratic Iowa snow storms which dressed the earth in a coat of white to a depth of about eight inches. We have a farm residence located about sixty rods from the river near here. At the date of which I write my daughter and her family were residing upon this farm. On arising in the early morning of the 17th and looking out of the window she beheld not only the great expanse of white, but to her great surprise a fine specimen of the King Rail which was walking about on the porch floor picking up a few stray crumbs and anything else that might help to sustain life for a cold and exceedingly hungry rail. The poor bird had no doubt been flying in the icy air until its wings refused to carry it any further and seeing this porch floor free from snow, it alighted there and began as best it could to satisfy its hunger.

On being disturbed of course it flew away, but my daughter supposing it would soon be back scattered some food on the floor. She was not disappointed for in a short time the bird was back and by the way it devoured the food it showed plainly that it was nearly starved. It also came back a number of times later to obtain a "hand out" at that back porch, until the snow went away so it could find food more to a rail's taste, after which it was not seen again. How the rails that did not find food and shelter during those awful days may have fared is not a pleasant matter to contemplate.

On April 14, 1921, and again on May 20, 1925, I saw single individual Soras. Both of these were feeding at the water's edge of West Creek. I watched the latter for fifteen minutes at close range. Part of the time it attempted to hide among the weeds or under drift wood, but though I approached within ten feet it did not fly. After eyeing me curiously for a few minutes it went on hunting for food again.

On October 1, 1925, while walking over a blue grass pasture, I came to a ditch or washout ten feet or more in depth. Chunks of sod had slid down the sides of this ditch more or less of the way so as to give it a terraced appearance. In crossing this ditch I was stepping and hopping from one of these sod patches to the other when suddenly one of the little Black Rails flew from under my feet. It dropped down again just as suddenly about fifteen feet from me and attempted to hide about one of those grass patches. I approached cautiously to get a good view, but since it met with little success in hiding, it soon flew out of the ditch and disappeared.

SIGOURNEY, IOWA.

These most peculiar and shy birds are so rare in this part of the state (Sigourney, Iowa), that during a period of fifteen years of careful observation of all our birds, only eight individuals belonging to four species of rails have come under my observation. So far as I know none of them breed here. If they do, I have never been fortunate enough to discover a nest.

The larger marshes and ponds in this vicinity have mostly been drained long ago and converted into cultivated fields. Consequently few nesting sites suitable for rails remain. Migratory birds as a rule return each summer to the locality where they were reared. It is also a fact that the life of most of our smaller birds is rather short. These facts account for the great scarcity or total absence of birds from localities where their nesting sites have all been destroyed.

Following is a list of the rails which it has been my opportunity to observe and an account of the circumstances under which they were seen.

On May 5, 1911, I was walking through a damp and marshy meadow when one of the little Black Rails raised up in front of my feet, flew ahead a short distance then dropped into the grass again, and although I hunted and beat the grass about this spot for some time I was unable to flush or see it again.

On May 9, 1918, I found the dead body of a Sora Rail on the pavement directly under the line of some twenty-five electric wires, on one of our city streets. There had been a heavy wind, rain, and thunder storm the night before and this bird had no doubt become bewildered in flight, bumped into these wires and killed itself. On the 16th of the same month I saw another Sora daintily running along the edge of a small pond and disappearing in the grass.

On June 1, 1920, I saw a Virginia Rail running along the road-side near a small marsh and disappearing in the grass and weeds. Owing to the lateness of the date and the proximity of the marsh, this may have been one of a nesting pair, but I was unable to locate a nest or again to see the bird.