

Black Rail
26 Apr 1992
n. of Des Moines, Polk Co., IA
*Miller
IBL 62:77, 63:69, Kraemer & Miller 1993

Record Number: 92-16
Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATION

Barb Miller, 2730 Moyer, Des Moines, IA 50310 (6/30/93)

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 62:77

Records Committee: IBL 63:69

Kraemer, D., and B. Miller. 1993. Black Rail sighting in Polk County. IBL 63:105.

VOTE: 7 A-D

A-D, A convincing description including white spotting, rusty nape, and dark bill. The April date eliminates possibility of young soras.

A-D, Diagnostic description. It is unusual that such good views are obtained of this species.

A-D, Although I am always skeptical of Black rail sightings in Iowa this bird was studied, and the diagnostic field marks, white spec on back and rusty nape, were noted.

A-D, Key identifying marks observed for Black Rails. Another example of serendipity in birding!

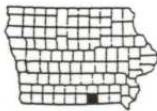
The North American population of the Great Black-backed Gull has been increasing for close to a century and as of yet there is no sign that the expansion of this species has stopped. The species was first reported in Iowa in 1978. In all, there are about 15 reports from Iowa; 11 from winter, 2 in fall, and 1 in summer. The above report is the first spring record. Reflecting this increase, the Great Black-backed Gull status on the latest checklist of Iowa birds (Kent and Bendorf, *Iowa Bird Life* 61:101-109, 1991) has been upgraded from accidental to casual.

810 North B Street, Indianola, IA 50125

RED KNOTS AT RATHBUN RESERVOIR

CHARLOTTE SCOTT

On 8 October 1992, between 7:45 and 8:45 p.m., I was parked 30-50 feet from a stretch of muddy beach on south Rathbun Lake near the dedication site in Appanoose County. It had been raining but had cleared. For two weeks we had been having very good shorebird activity at this spot, and that morning had been watching Sanderlings, Pectoral Sandpipers, and two dowitchers feeding. Three birds flew in and joined the dowitchers. They were the same stocky, plump shape as the dowitchers but smaller in size and had much shorter bills. They stayed with the dowitchers the entire time we watched and fed similarly--rapid probing in the mud and shallow water, sometimes going so deep their eyes were covered.



The black bills were straight, fairly heavy, and 1.5 to 1.75 times the length of the head. The legs were short and dusky colored. Their backs were gray, upper breasts a lighter gray, and very white on the belly. A distinct line separated the upper breast and white belly though not as decisive as on a Pectoral Sandpiper. The overall breast color appeared much lighter than on the dowitchers. The wings in flight had a faint, fine white line the length of the coverts, and the rump appeared light. The wing edges were dark, and a faint white eye line was visible. The overall appearance was of a nondescript gray, short-legged shorebird.

I have watched Red Knots in winter plumage in Florida and felt comfortable identifying these birds as Red Knots. The gals with me, Dorothy Cornett, Kay Malmberg, and Mary Montgomery and I viewed the birds through the scope, and we agreed on the identification. We alerted other members of the Rathbun Bird Club. At least two others, Ray Cummins and Tom Johnson, saw the knots later that day. They each saw four birds, and agreed with our identification.

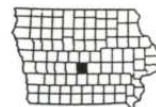
Most authorities I consulted agree that the Red Knot migrates from southern South America mainly along the Atlantic Coast and is a rare migrant in the interior. Although for many years there were few records from Iowa, there have been at least eight records in the past decade, all in fall with dates from 5 August to 27 September. Most involve only a single bird. This is the latest fall record from Iowa, and other than 14 seen in May 1934, is the most seen together in Iowa.

320 East Lee Street, Seymour, IA 52590

BLACK RAIL SIGHTING IN POLK COUNTY

DICK KRAEMER AND BARBARA MILLER

On 26 April 1992, between 2:00 and 3:00 p.m., we were birding an area 0.5 miles east of NE 14th Street (Highway 69) on NE 70th Avenue on the south side of Ankeny. This marshy area, locally known as Carney Marsh, is a combination of open water, cattails and grassy areas with trees along most of the edges except for the west edge (railway) and the road (NE. 70th Ave.) that cuts through the marsh itself. We were sitting on the railroad tracks on the west side of the marsh enjoying a good view of the marsh and several Soras. After 10 to 15 minutes of just watching, a small black bird appeared at the edge of last year's cattails and then disappeared. Fortunately it and its companion reappeared six or seven more times, allowing us time to confirm our original identification; two adult Black Rails.



These birds, which were about 50 feet apart, were at the edge of the cattails exhibiting similar behaviors of working their way in and out of the cattails and poking around in the mud with their bills. We did not see them fly or hear them call. They acted very cautious, never ventured far from the cover of the cattails, and could have been overlooked if we hadn't elected just to sit and watch for movement in the marsh.

The birds were easy to identify. Their location, behavior, and a clear view of all of their major identifying marks supported our original thoughts of Black Rail. At first glance it was a totally dark little bird with a short tail and neck acting very "rail like" With subsequent views we could see both the white speckles on its back and the rusty nape patch that was visible with 10x50 binoculars. The birds were viewed at a distance varying from 75-125 feet on an overcast day. Subsequent attempts to see the rails during the next several days failed. A neighbor, who watches the marsh for the owners, complained that someone in waders had trespassed into the marsh and waded through most of it the day after our observation. Perhaps this was enough disturbance for these reclusive birds to move on.

There are few other accepted records of the Black Rail in Iowa (see Dinsmore et al., 1984, *Iowa Birds*, Iowa State University Press, pp. 121-122). The most recent was one seen in Dickinson County on 8 October 1989 (Hansen, *Iowa Bird Life* 61:26-27, 1991).

2808 Randolph St., Waterloo, IA 50702 and 669 61st St., Des Moines, IA 50312

9726

What species? BLACK RAIL How many? 2 92-16
 Location? 1/2 mile EAST OF N.E. 14th ST (Hwy 69) ON N.E. 70th AVE - Also known as CARDEY MARSH
 Type of habitat? SHALLOW MARSH w/ DEAD CATTAILS, SOME SHORT GREEN MARSH GRASS
 When? date(s): APRIL 26, 1992 time: 2:15 to 2:50 PM
 Who? your name and address: BARB MILLER - 2730 MAYER, Des Moines, IA 50310
 others with you: DICK KRAEMER - 2808 RANDOLPH, WATERLOO, IA 50702
 others before or after you: _____

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

Completely dark, except for white speckles on it's back, dark bill, short tail & neck. Dick with 10x50 binoculars was able to see rusty nape patch. My 7x35's just didn't pick up that characteristic.

Had been watching Soras in same area - for size comparison the Black Rail was smaller — but with a similar shape.

I first noticed a small dark bird working it's way in and out of the edge of ^{dead} cattails. It was such a quick glimpse we both wanted to see it again so we waited. During the next 1/2 hour we had (6 or 7) good looks not just glimpses of this same bird. We know there were at least 2 because Dick & I were each watching one & describing it to each other & we realized we were not watching the same one at the same location.

These birds, in both separate sightings, were at the edge the dead cattails weaving in and out of sight, poking around in the mud with their bills. We did not see it fly or hear it's call. It was a very cautious bird never leaving the edge of the cattails spending most of it's time inside the cattails.

Similar species and how eliminated: THERE REALLY AREN'T other small black birds matching our description found poking around in the cattails. Peterson's mentioned other young rails are also black - this ^{bird} acted like a "mature adult" bird, immature rails from Peterson's lack the white speckles on the back & rusty nape patch.
 Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? NO

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:

OVERCAST, Windy 50° 10x50 & 7x35 Binoculars
75-125 feet - Viewed AT VARIOUS LOCATIONS.

Distance measured with Range FINDER

Previous experience with species and similar ones: NEITHER OF US HAD SEEN BLACK RAILS, WE BOTH HAD SEEN SIMILAR SHAPED & BEHAVIOR BIRDS - SORAS/RAILS

References and persons consulted before writing description: NAT. Geog. GUIDE TO N.A. BIRDS

How long before field notes made? AS SOON AS WE RETURNED TO this form completed? 8 DAYS

BAR - ABOUT 10 min.

MAIL TO: T. H. Kent, Field Reports Editor, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City IA 52240

92-16

4/26/92 CARDEY MARSH 2:20-2:50 PM
 Hwy 69 (NE 14th St.) No. of I80
 to NE 70th Ave. EAST on 70th Ave
 1/2 mile to MARSH

BLACK RAILS (2) were sighted from R.R.
 TRACKS ON ~~WEST~~ WEST SIDE OF MARSH, NORTH
 SIDE OF THE ROAD.

Overcast, Windy 50°

FIRST NOTICED SMALL BLACK BIRD with
 white speckles on ~~its~~^{its} back feeding on
 edge of dead cattails. Disappeared into
 cattails. Another "small black sora-like
 bird" was spotted about 10 min. later
 further back than original bird. While
 Dick was watching this second one - my
 first one reappeared 10-15 ft. left of
 its original location. We both began
 describing the bird ^{at its location} to each other &
 realized we had the same species in
 view but NOT THE SAME BIRD - THERE WERE
 2 OF THEM.

Dick with his 10x50 binoculars was
 able to see the rusty patch on the neck
 of the original bird. ^{where it reappeared} Both of us noticed
 the white spots on the back, sora shape
 but ~~smaller~~ smaller, short neck, ^{at tail} dark bill,
 Sora-like feeding activities and the

92-16

~~the~~ overall dark color of these birds -
Dick confirmed that his "second bird"
and mine were the same.

We had just seen 2 Sora's near the
same location which gave a good
indication of relative size. The
RAILS being much smaller - about 1/2 the size.

