

Black Rail
15 May 1989
Zirble Sl., Cerro Gordo Co., IA
*Walter
IBL 59:78, 81, 61:85

Record Number: 89-15
Classification: A-D

DOCUMENTATION

Jan L. Walter

REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 59:78, 81

Records Committee: IBL 61:85

VOTE: 6 A-D, 1 NA

A-D. Sounds like a typical encounter with this species and I don't know what else it might have been.

A-D. Despite brevity of view, habitat, details supported this identification.

NA. Sora not eliminated. Bill color not seen, size comparison to blackbird valid for Sora not Black Rail, and Sora would appear black going away.

A-D. Minimal description, but size and color eliminates other rails. Size comparison to Virginal Rail further substantiates record. Date is too early for rail chicks.

A-D. It's frustrating not to be able to see red, speckling, and barring, but my two experiences with this species have been very similar to that described here.

A-D. Although not all diagnostic marks seen all other species eliminated adequately by the documentation; mainly because of size and coloration and lack of mention of any lighter wing patches. Yellow Rail not mentioned in similar species but just as likely (or more so).

A-D. I like this documentation--good description of bird and consideration of alternatives carefully made, satisfactorily eliminating all.

REVOTE: 6 A-D, 1 NA

A-D. I don't agree that a Sora would appear black going away when seen at 15 to 45 feet with "strong light, evening sun behind..." the observer. In this light, the yellow or green legs of a Sora should be visible but the legs of this bird were described as "dark". Why is bill color a problem? The documentation says the bill was not long and did not contrast with body color. On 15 May, any Sora should be an adult bird so it's yellow bill would likely be noticed. As I interpret the description, the observer did not suggest that size of bird was like a blackbird. The National Geographic guide lists Sora and Red-winged Blackbird as both 8 3/4" long and the Black Rail as 6". If the size of this bird eliminated blackbird at 8 3/4", it also indicates against Sora with the same length.

A-D. Unless I missed something, size was not compared to blackbird. Size was noted as half the size of Virginia, which would be about right. This bird was described as all black when seen both flying and walking, which should have eliminated Sora. Bill was described as not well seen, but not contrasting with body color. Breeding plumage Sora would have had obvious yellow

bill.

NA. Sora not eliminated. Bill color not seen, the author's elimination of blackbird suggests that bird was the size of a blackbird, therefore supporting Sora not Black Rail, and Sora would appear black going away.

A-D. Good description of Black Rail. Other rails eliminated by color and size. Juvenile rails eliminated by early date--the very earliest rail chicks would not hatch until the last 10 days of May (roughly).

A-D. Virginia Rail and Sora appear about same size when flying away, so half the size of Virginia is too small for Sora. NA voter seems to have misread bit about blackbird. Documentation clearly says that size eliminates blackbird. Dangling legs and walking 5-6 feet in canal seems to eliminate other marsh birds such as sparrows or wrens. Documentation carefully points out adequacy of light.

A-D. Bill color not clearly seen but comment of "did not contrast in color with body" is important. This comment clearly eliminates Sora. All the many Sora's I have seen in flight, unless it is very dim light, were a grayish brown to brown color; not appearing black unless the lighting was very dim.

A-D. NA raises good objection, but size comparison was made with VA Rail, thereby eliminating Sora. While possibly incorrect, I believe details adequate to suggest "beyond reasonable doubt".
SENT TO: Jan L. Walter, 934 13th SE, Mason City, IA 50401
[9/28/89]

DOCUMENTATION FORM

For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

89-15

What species? Black Rail (Zirbel) How many? 1Location? East-west dike n. side of Zirbel Slough, Cerro Gordo Co., IaType of Habitat? Open pool of water between dike and dense marshWhen? date(s): 75 May, 1989 time: 7:13 to 7:13 PMWho? your name and address: Jan L. Walter, 934-13th S.E., Mason City, Ia 50401Others with you: Jim B. Walter and Edna E. Peters, Rockwell, IaOthers before or after you: None

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, undertail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior. As we walked east on the dike with the evening sun behind us, a very small, chunky, all black bird without a noticeable tail flushed from the base of the dike about 15 feet ahead of us. We saw it for a few seconds as it flew about 40 feet, just above the water, landed by a channel through the dense marsh vegetation directly opposite, walked 5 or 6 feet down the channel, and disappeared. Its flight was weak and feeble and its dark legs dangled beneath its body as it flew. The bill was not clearly seen, but it was not long and did not contrast in color with the body. It was not heard. A few minutes later, a Virginia Rail came out into the open. It was about twice as large as the Black Rail. Also, the Virginia's long, red bill and overall reddish, not black, appearance were very easily seen even though it was in the shade of the vegetation and not in clear sunlight as the Black Rail was.

Similar species; how eliminated: Size; Rail shape, flight, and behavior eliminated near-by Blackbirds. It was too early in the year for a downy Rail chick in North Iowa. Also downy chicks would not be able to fly. Very small size and all black color eliminated other Rail species. Even though we did not see the reddish wash on the back, white speckling on the wings, or barring on the flanks, the black, not reddish, underparts eliminated the possibility of a small Virginia Rail.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification? No

If yes, explain:

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

Clear sky, strong light, evening sun behind us

Distance 15 feet (closest) to 45 feet (farthest) - guess

8x40 Binoculars

Previous experience with species and similar ones: Saw 1 Black Rail clearly at White Wildlife Area, Cerro Gordo Co., Ia 11 May, 1986. Have seen a number of Soras and a few Virginia Rails (JLW + JBW). EEP has also seen Black Rail previously, as well as many Soras and Virginia Rails.

References and persons consulted before writing description: NoneHow long before field notes made? Right away this form completed? Next day

Send completed form to Field Reports or CBC editor (address on back cover of Iowa Bird Life).