

Black Rail  
15 Sep 1990  
Cone M., Louisa Co., IA  
K. Lowder  
IBL 61:16, 19, 62:22

1

Record Number: 90-26  
Classification: NA

## DOCUMENTATION

Ken Lowder

## REFERENCES

Field Reports: IBL 61:16, 19  
Records Committee: IBL 62:22

VOTE: 2 A-D, 5 NA

A-D: Document seems to be quite adequate.

NA: Ken, this probably was a Black Rail. However, the view was such that apparently it wasn't possible to see any of the marks usually considered to be diagnostic. A small black bird acting like a rail is just not quite enough description to rule out the possibility of something else. Yes, the identification is plausible. At the same time, it's not unreasonable consider it might not have been a Black Rail.

NA: I do not discount the very real possibility that this was indeed a Black Rail. I am also aware of the difficulties in adequately documenting a bird as elusive as Black Rail. The flight characteristics mentioned certainly suggest a member of the rail family, and Yellow and Virginia Rails are eliminated by the field marks noted. There remains some doubt, however, when all major field marks--bill, maroon nape, leg color and length, and shape of body--are not seen and/or described. I am also concerned that the shape of the wings which was seen is not given. In addition, it would seem that if a rail flushed within three feet and flew for twenty feet, the dangling legs (or at least the feet) would be visible at some point. Also notes and documentation appear to have been written several days after sighting.

NA: My efforts to come up with what this may have been were pretty much unsuccessful. Had this been earlier in the year, a recently fledged Rail such as Sora might have been a possibility, but this date is much too late for that, at least according to the literature I have. In conclusion, I think you probably did have a Black Rail. I think if I had seen what you saw, I probably would have added it to my Iowa (and life) list. On the other hand, your view was very brief, and none of the diagnostic field marks could be seen. In view of the rarity of this bird and the need for conclusive evidence for accepting this bird in Iowa, this sighting should probably not be included into the scientific record. But keep trying.

NA: This documentation lacks sufficient detail, understandably, due to the lack of observation time. No size comparison with nearby species makes the 6" size estimate suspect. Blackbird with cutoff tail not eliminated. On the other hand I cannot eliminate it either.

A-D: Description is that of Black Rail beyond any doubt.

NA: The observer gave good details and descriptions, but the

key field marks of a Black Rail were not seen. The chestnut nape, short black bill, white speckling on the back, and the white barring on the flanks were not observed. This may have been a Black Rail but more likely was a blackish rail chick.

DOCUMENTATION FORM  
For Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

90-26

What species? Black Rail How many? 1  
Location? Dike running East/West across Cove Marsh, Linn County  
Type of Habitat? Six inch high grass variable to knee high vegetation  
When? date(s): 9-15-90 time: 11:00 A.M.  
Who? your name and address: Ken Louder, RR2, Box 54, Iowa City, IA 52241  
Others with you: None  
Others before or after you: None to my knowledge

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.

This bird was flushed immediately in front of me (within 3 feet) as I was walking across the dike. As I was looking down the dike at the time, the bird was observed from the moment it flushed until it landed. The bird was viewed for three-four seconds from the rear the entire time, so that legs and head were not viewed. The entire back and superior aspect of both wings were observed. When the bird flushed, it rose <sup>from 6" grass in center of dike</sup> to about 3 ft off the ground immediately in front of me and then a total of about 20 ft away down the dike landing on the edge. Repeated attempts to flush again were unsuccessful.

- My immediate impression was that the bird's ~~flight~~ manner of flight was typically that of a rail, the staggering, awkward manner was apparent. The bird was uniformly very dark <sup>black</sup> with no suggestion of lighter color anywhere on the bird.  
- The bird was small - no larger than six inches. (over)

Similar species; how eliminated:

- Sora; eliminated by size and color
- Yellow rail; absolute lack of white wing patches; my bird was black - with no suggestion of lighter color anywhere.
- Virginia rail; eliminated by size and color of bird
- Could possibly have been a rail chick of another species - ruled out because of presence of chicks at this late date would have been extremely extraordinary; and because chicks would be incapable of flight.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about the identification?         
If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), optical equipment.  
A cold front had just passed through E. Iowa two days prior. Day was clear; sunny with chilly temps (mid 50's). Lighting was excellent. No optical equipment was needed or even useful as bird was so close.

Previous experience with species and similar ones:

Sora and Virginia rails seen on many occasions. Had not seen Black or Yellow rail previously.

References and persons consulted before writing description:

Peter Wickham Cedar Rapids, was consulted the day I saw the birds.  
AGS Field Guide, Iowa Birds by Dinsmore, et al.

How long before field notes made? 9-26-90 this form completed? 9-26-90

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

- 90-26
- The tail was very short, uniformly black, and rounded across the end.
  - The chestnut rump described in Field guides was not visualized - the bird's manner of flight was left the body & wings angled at a  $45^\circ$  away from us making the back and wings entirely visible, but the bird dropped its head down, making entire head impossible to view as the bird was flying directly away from us.
  - The bird made no sound.
  - Wings were six-eight inches without variation in color - all dark black - no light patches.