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VIRGINIA RAIL

CLAPPER RAIL

COOT

KING RAIL

SORA

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Rallus Elegans

KING RAIL

THE king rail is the large fresh-water rail of the United States. About all that the average man sees of this bird is a glimpse as it jumps up, flies straight away just above the grass tops for a little distance and drops down suddenly as if its wings had given out. It is much like the Virginia rail in appearance, but larger and possibly handsomer.

The king rail seems to be confined mainly to the eastern United States, but there is a sub-species in Cuba. It breeds from Nebraska, southern Minnesota, Ontario, New York and Connecticut south to eastern Texas, Florida and Cuba. It winters mainly in the southern part of its breeding range, but a few have been taken north in winter. It is recorded in

Maine, South Dakota and southern Mexico.

The bird seems to differ somewhat in habits from other rails. Where not much molested it is unafraid and will walk about in plain view, squawking loudly, but ordinarily it is content to skulk and hide. When caught alive it squalls like a hen taken from the roost. It frequents the swampy borders of rivers and ponds overgrown with vegetation as well as the marsh and meadow, and often in autumn it may be found on dry land where it feeds on insects, seeds and grains. Thus it is that while people rarely go out to hunt king rails, many are shot in cornfields or near swamps by sportsmen who are out with their dogs after woodcock or bob-white as well as by those seeking snipe or ducks.

Rallus Crepitans

CLAPPER RAIL WAYNE'S CLAPPER RAIL FLORIDA CLAPPER RAIL LOUISIANA CLAPPER RAIL

THE clapper rails have been divided into no less than seven species and sub-species. The differences in plumage are rather trifling, and the birds all resemble one another more or less closely in form and habits.

Four sub-species of the clapper rail inhabit the salt marshes of the eastern United States, while the California clapper rail takes their place on the Pacific Coast. The clapper rail breeds from Connecticut to North Carolina, and winters mainly south of New Jersey. Other races occupy the rest of the range of the species, which extends along the coast from North Carolina to Texas. Another, Cory's clapper rail, inhabits the Bahama Islands.

The clapper is a bird of salt marshes, but is found along swampy shores and tidal waters

of the larger rivers. No rail is more noisy. Where it breeds in great numbers its racket is comparable to that of a large flock of Guinea hens. As it nests on the salt marshes, its eggs are washed away sometimes by the waves in severe storms, accompanied by very high tides, and the sitting birds are drowned in considerable numbers. It is very prolific, each pair producing, annually, ten to twenty-four young, as two broods often are raised in a season, but it has no means of defence; therefore rails form a large part of the food of all predatory creatures of the marsh.

The shooting of this rail takes place mainly on high tides, and is similar in character to the pursuit of the sora. The clapper can swim and dive well, and if wounded may elude its pursuer by submerging its body among the marsh vegetation.

Rallus Virginianus

VIRGINIA RAIL

OUR grandfathers told us that children should be seen and not heard. The Virginia rail is heard but not seen. Many of the peculiar cackling and grunting noises of the fresh-water marsh are made by this bird.

The Virginia rail, like the sora, wanders over a large part of North America, but its range does not extend so far north or south as that of the latter. It breeds from the southern Canadian provinces and southern Keewatin south to southern California, Utah, Kansas, Missouri, Illinois and New Jersey and probably much farther south locally, as it is known to breed in Mexico and North Carolina. It winters (largely in the Southern States) from Oregon, Utah and Colorado to Lower California and Guatemala, also in the lower Mississippi Valley, and from North Carolina (rarely Massachusetts) to Florida and other Gulf coast States. It is recorded from Newfoundland, Cuba and Bermuda.

It will puzzle the hunter, who has seen this bird spring out of the sedge and flutter along feebly for a few yards, to imagine how it could get to Cuba or Bermuda, but this species and the sora make long night flights over water, and as they are more or less nocturnal they fly more strongly by night than by day. On moonlit nights when the marsh wrens sing and the feeding ducks gabble and guzzle in the pools, this rail may be heard calling, as it makes its way from place to place, probably feeding as readily as other birds feed by daylight. It is quite an acrobat, as it climbs among the stems and leaves of reeds and water plants, runs swiftly over lily pads and swims and even dives at need with ease and celerity. The Virginia rail apparently is not nearly as numerous as the sora. It breeds not only in large fresh-water marshes, but also along low, wet alder runs, where the nest may be built among the drift, but more often it is

placed among reeds or other water plants. It sometimes nests where springs are found in the salt marsh, and often where brackish waters ebb and flow at the heads of little creeks that open into the tide-waters of the larger rivers. The young, like those of all rails, are covered with black down, and they soon run and swim with their parents.

This species seldom rises unless suddenly

surprised or chased into the air by a fast dog. There is no swifter runner among our small birds. Its pursuit would soon spoil the ordinary setter or pointer, but many rails are killed in the fresh meadows and marshes by snipe shooters and more by gunners hunting the sora or the clapper in the salt marshes. The flight of this rail is low and slow, and it may be killed with a light snipe charge.

Porzana Carolina

SORA

THE forest and the jungle disappear before the advance of settlement, but in the desert and the marsh the wilderness makes its last stand. In marsh lands, even close to large cities, the mink and the muskrat still pursue their way, and here the sora peers from its age-old fastness in the reeds and cattails. Soras are found in migration along river shores and in wet meadows and swamps, throughout the land.

The sora, sometimes called rail-bird or ortolan, is the rail of North America—the only rail found generally in the marshes of practically the entire continent. It breeds from central British Columbia, southern Mackenzie, central Keewatin, and the Gulf of St. Lawrence south to California, Utah, Colorado, Kansas, Illinois and New Jersey, and winters from northern California, Illinois and South Carolina, south through the Antilles and Central America to Venezuela and Peru. It is recorded from Bermuda, Greenland and England.

The sora is a shy and elusive bird, given to keeping out of sight. The saying "thin as a rail" came not from the fence, but from the bird which, although it is about the size of bob-white, can compress its narrow body so as to pass readily between two reed stems much less than an inch apart. There is more or less mystery about the habits of rails, because they spend most of their lives under cover, snooping about in under-grass passages made by them or other creatures of the marsh, or wading or even swimming in water

overshadowed by marsh or swamp vegetation. We should see little of the rails if they were never forced to fly, but we may hear their froglike voices in the marsh, if they are there, whenever we make a sudden noise like striking a paddle hard upon the water. The sora has a short chickenlike bill, and feeds more than the long-billed rails on the seeds of wild rice and other reeds. Therefore by the time it has fed awhile in the Middle and Southern States, in September or October, it is in prime condition for the table and superior to the long-billed rails.

When marshes are flooded, rails may be found in grass fields near the marshes. In such situations a spaniel that will chase them may give the sportsman some shooting. In dry seasons they may be flushed in the same way in the marshes, but the gunner must wear high boots and watch his steps. Soras rise just above the tops of the marsh grass and flutter along a short distance with hanging legs, offering a mark about as difficult as a tin can floating in a rapid current. The best rail shooting is to be had in coast marshes when the rising tide has driven the birds to the highest points, and when there is sufficient water to float a flat-bottomed skiff and two men. One poles the boat through the reeds and the other shoots the startled birds as they rise to seek cover elsewhere. Great bags have been made in this way on the Atlantic Coast in September. A fair shot accustomed to the sport can bag nearly every bird that rises, but the novice is fortunate if he has fair success

Fulica Americana

COOT

THE coot is indeed a coot, and it looks the part. Simple, confiding and foolish by nature, it learns in time by experience not to trust mankind too far. Often it is confused in the mind of the sportsman with the so-called coots or surf ducks which in migration prefer the sea to the fresh-water ponds that the true coot frequents.

The coot ranges over most of North America. It has been recorded from Newfoundland, Labrador, Greenland and Alaska. It breeds from central British Columbia, southern Mackenzie, Manitoba, Quebec and New Brunswick, south to northern Lower California, Texas, Tennessee and New Jersey, also in southern Mexico, the southern Antilles and Guatemala. It winters from southern British Columbia, Nevada, Utah, the Ohio Valley and Virginia, south to Colombia. It is casual at Bermuda.

Few birds are more widely known in this country than the coot, and few are less appreciated. Like the rails it lives in fresh-water marshes, but does less wading and more

swimming than the rails. Its toes are lobed, each separate toe forming a paddle by itself, and the bird can swim as well as a duck, but its flight is rather feeble and rail-like. In rising from the water it cannot spring into the air, like some of the ducks, but must flutter and run along the surface to get headway. When no danger seems to threaten them coots will leave the cover of the marsh and come out into open water, where they swim and dive for food like any duck, but when thoroughly alarmed they scatter for the cover of the border vegetation. A pool "black" with coots will be cleared quickly by a sudden alarm, but most of the birds merely take cover and soon reappear.

The coot is so simple that it is not hard to approach, but its flesh is so inferior that it is not much sought after. Nevertheless, many are killed from duck blinds, and many more are shot by settlers, when ducks are hard to get, as coots, dressed soon after they are shot, are not so bad, and fried coot graces many a squatter's table.