

## THE BLACK RAIL

By TURNER E. McMULLEN

The reason why the Black Rail does not appear on the lists of birds observed except with the greatest infrequency is not due to the fact that there is any difficulty in identifying the bird when seen. The difficulty is in seeing the bird. There is little danger in confusing this small black rail with any other of our birds. The bird breeds along the Atlantic coast in the marshes about the islands and the mainland probably from Massachusetts to Florida. Most nests, however, have been found along the New Jersey coast.

Accounts of the habits of the bird are very rare in ornithological literature. Its smallness, nocturnal habits, and propensity for keeping quietly hidden in the grasses of the marsh until almost tramped upon help account for this. It hunts cover when discovered and does so with a singleness of purpose and speed that tantalizes the would be observer with the merest glimpse. While hunting for nests on May 31, 1920, one of these shy rails afforded me an unforgettable experience. He actually lit and perched on a nearby bayberry bush after I had flushed him out from the grass in front of my feet. There he sat out in the open while I observed him. No quibbling ornithologist in an office could claim that I had probably seen the young of some other rail dodging through the grasses of the marsh. My bird gave me a good long look. Satisfied with my view, I waited for him to fly off but he did not do so. So I moved closer and closer until I approached to within four feet of this sparrow-like chicken of the marsh. Then he flew away in a fast strong and straight flight. At another time, a bird I flushed flew over some bayberry bushes into another marsh. This flight was at least thirty yards in length. It flew fast and strong.

The first nest of the Black Rail I ever found was empty. The second nest I discovered on June 2, 1921. It contained 7 eggs. It was dissimilar to any others I have found in that it was among bunches of both live and dead grasses. Usually there is no dead grass about the nest. This nest was about 6 inches up in a bunch of dead grass about a foot high. It was on the meadow without any near-by water. The usual location is in long flat-lying green grass. Sometimes there is a canopy over the nest. How the bird manages to build this canopy is a mystery. Possibly it builds the nest first, then stands on it as a builder would use a scaffold to construct the roof. Of the 79 nests I have examined, two contained 9 eggs; nine had 8 eggs each; the others had 7 or less. I have only found and handled the young once. They in common with the young of the other rails are jet black.

The drainage of the marshes in recent years has seriously interfered with the breeding of these birds and discouraged my inquiries into their life histories. I have not searched for them since 1940.

If any one is looking for a sporting proposition I challenge him with a day in search of the Black Rail's nest. It is true that the temperature is often over 100 degrees, that the mud is deep and at times rather smelly, that drinking water is not very near, that at times you cannot see through the mosquitoes, that you must spend most of the time bent over, that you must part every bunch of grass with your hands, and that there is no near-by shade or place to sit down. Still it is great fun to find the nest of the little Black Rail.

On June 23, 1928, I guided a party consisting of Witmer Stone, J. Fletcher Street, Arthur C. Bent, Frank Willard, Walker Hand, and Samuel Scoville on a search for the nest of the Black Rail. We all went down to the seashore on the day previously. After checking in at the hotel we went over to the marsh for a preliminary view in preparation for our expedition on the following day. I had scarcely walked ten feet into the near-by meadow when I flushed a Black Rail from a nest containing 7 eggs. Willard returned to the hotel for his camera and succeeded in obtaining several photographs of the nest. The next day was spent in combing the marshes for Black Rail nests. Among the nests found were those of the Clapper Rail, Seaside Sparrow, Sharp-tailed Sparrow, Killdeer, Piping Plover, Tree Swallow, Flicker, and Starling. We found one Black Rail nest; the one we discovered the day before.