



Clapper Rail

Rallus longirostris

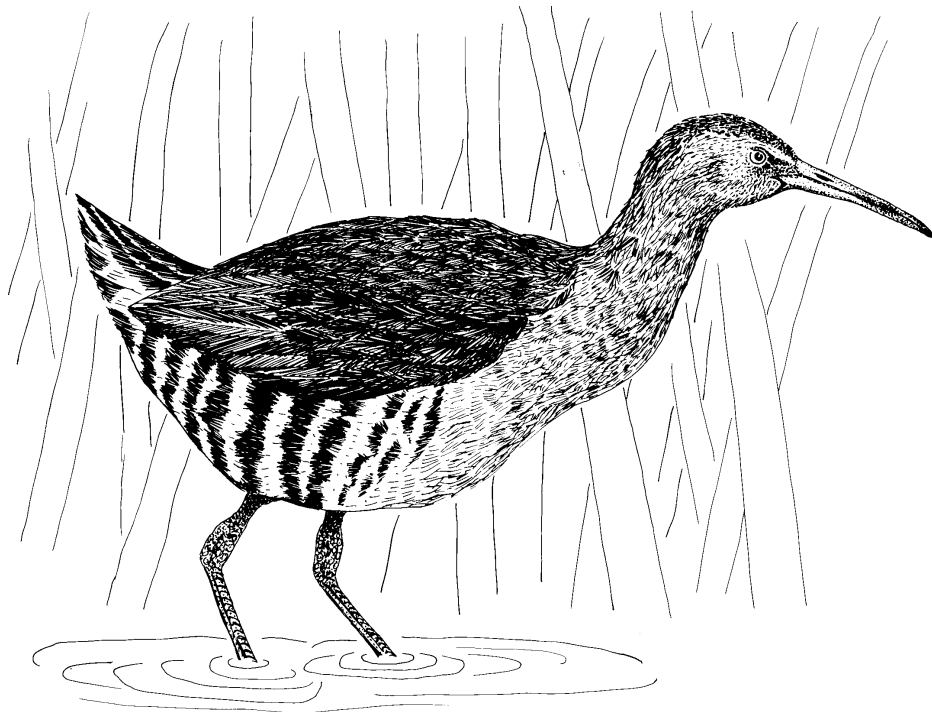
A raucous *chack-chack-chack* or a fleeting glimpse of a gray and brown bird slinking through marsh grass are sometimes all you will experience of the secretive clapper rail. This bird is normally found in the coastal salt marshes of North Carolina's easternmost counties. Hen-like in appearance, the clapper rail is locally known as the marsh hen. The saying "thin as a rail" comes from the bird's lean body, a characteristic that enables it to slip easily through marsh grass when walking or trying to escape predators.

The clapper rail, along with the Virginia rail and the king rail, are year-round residents of North Carolina. Three other rail species, the sora, yellow rail and black rail, may be seen in North Carolina during fall migration or winter. Even with this variety of rail species, the clapper rail is likely only to be confused with the king rail, a slightly larger bird that prefers freshwater marshes. The clapper rail is listed as a game bird and can be hunted in North Carolina.

History and Status

Clapper rails were once abundant; however, egg collecting and market hunting in the 1800s and early 1900s reduced rail populations significantly. There are accounts of over 120 eggs being collected in a day by a single person. Now, thanks to modern game laws, eggs cannot be collected and light hunting pressure appears to have no permanent effect on rail populations.

Instead, population size is



most affected on a year-to-year basis by the flooding of nests from high tides in the spring. The long-term population trend of the bird will be most severely affected by water pollution and the destruction of coastal marsh habitat. Due to the rail's secretive nature, the difficulty of working in marsh environments, and a lack of funding for rail research, basic information regarding life history and yearly population status is still somewhat limited.

Description

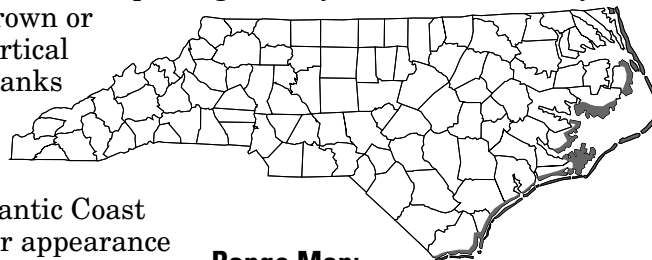
The clapper rail is one of the largest rail species, 14 to 16 inches in length. They can be distinguished by their chicken-like appearance, long unwebbed toes, long decurved bill and frequent upturned tail with white under-tail covert feathers. Clapper rails are olive-brown or gray-brown, with vertical gray-white barred flanks and buff or rust-colored breasts. The subspecies found along the Atlantic Coast generally has a paler appearance than other populations. Males and females are similar in size

and coloration. Juveniles are generally more uniformly colored than adults.

Clapper rails produce an astounding variety of calls, from a *he-e-eh-heh-heh-heh* to *chack-chack-chack*. Regardless of the interpretation, the call is loud and clattering in a series of 20 to 25 notes, lowering in pitch and increasing in tempo. Females have been heard to give a "purr" call.

Habitat and Habits

Clapper rails are found almost exclusively in coastal saltwater marshes. Observing clapper rails can be difficult because the birds prefer to run through thick marsh grass rather than fly. When they do take to the air, clapper rails are considered weak flyers and generally settle down shortly



Range Map:
Occupied range ■

after taking flight.

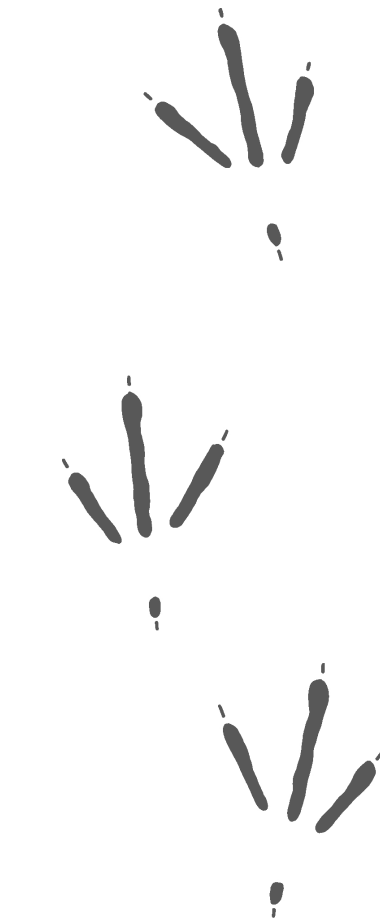
The nesting season occurs from May to June. Nests, built mostly by males, are clumps of vegetation and are often found where ditches or creeks cause the occurrence of tall and short grasses. Common nesting materials are rushes, sedges and cord grass. Generally, nine to 12 eggs are laid. Some rails may produce second clutches. Incubation averages 20 days and is probably performed by both sexes. The young are precocial and begin eating the first day, presumably on regurgitated pellets from the adult. Young rail are able to fly in nine to 10 weeks. Clapper rails prefer more of an animal-based diet than other rail species.

Range and Distribution

The range of the clapper rail includes the Atlantic, Gulf and California coasts, Central America, the Caribbean, and coastal South America. In North Carolina, clapper rails are found exclusively in coastal salt marshes. In winter, North Carolina has both a year-round resident population and a migrant population made up of birds from Northern states. Rails usually migrate at night, flying south along the coast. Recent analysis of winter bird observations indicates that highest densities occur from Florida to southern North Carolina.

People Interactions

Though their chattering call is often heard, rails are not often seen except by avid bird watchers or hunters. Best viewing opportunities occur at dawn and dusk as the birds leave the thick marsh grass and feed on open mud flats. Rail season opens in early September but hunting pressure remains light. Human-related activities that have the most negative impact on rail populations are development and pollution of coastal marsh habitats. Clapper rail populations can



best be protected by preserving these key areas.

References

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Credits

Written by Joe Fuller.

Illustrated by J.T. Newman.

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WILD Facts

CLAPPER RAIL

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Gruiformes

Average Size

Length: 14 to 16 inches

Food

Crayfish, small crabs, small fish, frogs, slugs, snails, aquatic insects, grasshoppers and seeds of weeds and woody plants. At least 79 percent of the year-round diet is animal-based.

Breeding

Monogamous: Pairs are established or reestablished each year. Nesting season runs from May to June. Incubation period is 20 days. Possibility of two clutches in a nesting season.

Young

From six to 14 young, usually nine to 12. Chicks are precocial, fed regurgitated pellets shortly after hatching, later collecting own food. Adult plumage acquired in October of first year.

Life Expectancy

Not documented.