Black Rail, *Laterallus jamaicensis*

Status: ***State:*** Endangered ***Federal:*** Migratory Nongame Bird of Management Concern

Identification

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Measuring only about the size of a sparrow, the diminutive black rail is the smallest North American rail. Adult black rails are dark gray or nearly black overall with a variable amount of scattered white spotting on the back that may also extend onto the wing coverts and secondaries. The nape and upper back are deep chestnut colored. The dark gray undertail coverts and flanks are streaked with white or light gray. The tail is short and grayish-brown. The bill is short and black and the legs and feet are grayish-brown. Although the sexes are similar in size, they differ slightly in plumage. The throat of the female may be pale gray or white, while that of the male may be pale to medium gray. Juvenile black rails resemble adults but are duller gray overall with less spotting above and thinner streaking on the flanks. Eye color, which changes with age, is red in adults and may range from brown to orange in juveniles.

The black rail is an elusive species that typically walks or runs rather than flies. Due to its secretive nature and nocturnal habits, this rail is more often heard than seen. The black rail's call, a repeated kic-kee-doo or kic-kic-kerr, may be given throughout the night but is most frequently voiced during the first few hours after sunset or before sunrise. Rarely, black rails may vocalize during the day. Vocal activity is greatest during the early breeding season, from late April to mid-May. Adults and young may communicate using kik or yip calls.

Habitat

Coastal salt and brackish marshes are home to the black rail, which nests in areas of elevated marsh that are flooded only during extremely high tides. Nests are typically located in marshes dominated by salt hay (Spartina patens). These marshes also may contain spike grass (Distichlis spicata), black rush (Juncus gerardi), or marsh elder (Iva frutescens). Salt-marsh cordgrass (S. alterniflora) and reed grass (Phragmites communis) may also occur within the marsh, but are not favored by black rails. Salt hay farming along the Delaware Bay shore inadvertently created habitat for breeding black rails. Marshes containing salt hay provide characteristically thick mats of overlapping vegetation, beneath which the rails traverse on pathways of flattened vegetation. During markedly high tides, black rails may seek cover within herbaceous vegetation in adjacent upland fields and meadows. Black rails occupy similar habitats throughout the year.

Status and Conservation

The black rail, once considered a game bird, was historically a locally common breeding species in tidal marshes along the Atlantic and Delaware Bay coasts of New Jersey. Following the 1920s and 1930s, black rail numbers began to decline as coastal wetlands were filled, ditched, and polluted. From 1953 to 1973, nearly 25 percent of tidal marshes in New Jersey were filled or diked, with the most severe losses occurring throughout the range of the black rail in Cumberland, Salem, Cape May, Atlantic, and Ocean counties. Increased human recreational activities at coastal marshes further threatened already depressed populations of this rail. Consequently, this species was lost from many historic breeding locales, particularly along the heavily used and developed Atlantic coast.

Due to severe population declines and localized distribution resulting from habitat loss, alteration, and degradation, the black rail was listed as a threatened species in New Jersey in 1987 and then as endangered in 2012. The New Jersey Natural Heritage Program considers the black rail to be "apparently secure globally," yet "rare in New Jersey" (Office of Natural Lands Management 1992). Because of its disjunct distribution and small population size, the black rail was included as a Migratory Nongame Bird of Management Concern in the United States by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in 1992. Habitat loss and population declines have also occurred in other northeastern states.