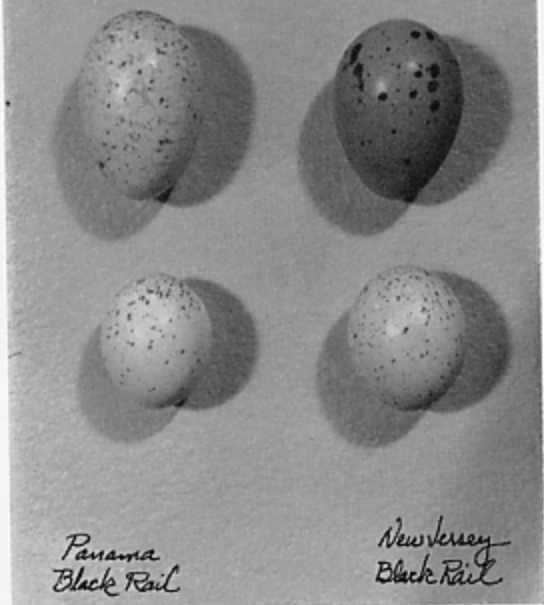


White-throated Crake
Lateralus albigularis
 Eggs in set. Nicaragua.

Sora



Panama
 Black Rail

New Jersey
 Black Rail

Comparison of an egg from Panama nest of Black Rail with New Jersey specimen; also shown are eggs of White-throated Crake and Sora. Below: collecting the Panama nest of Black Rail. The knife is at the base of nest; arrow points to nest opening.



Photo Philip A. Livingston

THE DISCOVERY OF THE BLACK RAIL
(*LATERALLUS JAMAICENSIS*)
IN PANAMA AND THE FIRST BREEDING RECORD

STEPHEN T. HARTY

In late June, 1963, Dr. George B. Reynard, Philip A. Livingston, Henry Matthews, and I departed by air for a birding vacation in Panama. Henry Matthews had spent a day or two there a year or so earlier while en route to Colombia, but for the rest of us this was our initial visit.

Our headquarters while in Panama was Barro Colorado Island. We were most fortunate to have the professional assistance and congenial companionship of Thomas C. Crebbs, Jr. while there. Mr. Crebbs, associated with Douglass College, Rutgers University, was in Panama on a six-month visit working with the Canal Zone Biological Area.

While much of our time was very profitably spent on Barro Colorado Island, we were all anxious to make the most of our visit and to see as much as possible of other neighboring areas. We took a number of side trips to such localities as Cerro Azul, Summit, Piña, and Gamboa. Each of these spots had its own ornithological attractions.

On July 6 the five of us, in one jeep, were driving eastward along the Pan American Highway between Panama City and Chepo, stopping at various spots to see what new birds we might find. At one such stop we heard a bird which George Reynard and I immediately recognized as a Black Rail. The bird was calling from the grasslands just to the south of the road, and as we continued to listen we heard a second bird perhaps a hundred yards away from the first. We shortly discovered that a honk on the horn would bring an almost immediate response from one or both birds. George Reynard lost no time in recording these calls on tape. This was, I should add, in mid-afternoon under generally clear skies.

Our adventure instinct had been thoroughly aroused by this discovery, and after attempting to pinpoint the location of the calls we set out to see whether we might flush one or more birds. Thomas Crebbs and Henry Matthews found themselves among stinging nettles almost immediately upon leaving the safety of the highway, but after negotiating this hazard they climbed a barbed wire fence and commenced the search in the grassy areas beyond. The rest of us, carefully avoiding the nettles, split up and joined in the search. We were surprised to find that the grass was almost waist deep in places and that it was quite wet and marshy underfoot. After we had been searching for a few minutes I heard a Black Rail call again, this time behind me, and between me and the road. The bird was about ten to twelve feet away and about twenty feet from George. As George approached, with his recording equipment in action, I slowly circled the spot and in so doing spotted a globe of grasses a short distance off the ground. I carefully parted

the concealing grasses so as to see the eggs, three in all. I recognized these as those of the Black Rail.

The nesting area was open savanna, and there were a number of knolls or small hills. The nest itself was located in a depression at the base of one of these knolls. The specific locality was 16.2 miles east of La Siesta Motel on the Tocomen Airport Circle.

After we had taken measurements, we collected the nest and eggs. The five of us had quite thoroughly trampled the grasses in our search operations, and I was fearful that a predator might find the nest were I not to collect it immediately. The three eggs proved to be very fresh. It is uncertain whether the clutch was complete, inasmuch as many birds in the tropics have considerably smaller clutches than their northern counterparts.

On the following day, July 7, Henry Matthews and I returned to the area in hopes of seeing a rail. One honk on the horn produced a response, again on the south side of the road but a bit further away. We walked through the grasses where we had found the nest to another low wet area beyond, and in the course of our search here Henry Matthews flushed a small dark sparrow-like rail which displayed no other field marks. The view was brief as the bird half-flew and half-ran over a patch of bent-over grasses. Taller grasses concealed my view, and I did not see the bird. After a further search, which was to no avail, we returned to our hotel in Balboa.

Again on July 26 I visited the area, this time with Thomas Czebbs. The horn trick worked again. One bird gave a call in reply, but we made no attempt to locate it.

The nest and set of three eggs are now in the collection of the Academy of Natural Sciences. They have been examined by Dr. Alexander Wetmore and Eugene Eisenmann. The eggs, measured by James Bond, are 24 x 18.5 mm, 24 x 18.5 mm, and 23.5 x 19 mm. These are slightly smaller than typical Black Rail eggs, but they are otherwise similar. The grasses making up the nest were identified by Dr. E. Schuyler of the Academy of Natural Sciences as *Paspalum*, a species of narrow-leaved grass, and *Rhynchospora*, a beak-rush or wide-leaved sedge. There was also a minor amount of a wide-leaved grass which was not specifically identified. The grasses and sedges supporting the nest were about 30 inches in height, with the bottom of the nest being seven inches off the ground. The diameter of the nest was about six inches. The nest itself was a loosely woven ball with a two-inch opening on one side.

The Black Rail has not previously been recorded in Panama. The wintering range of the North American population extends to Guatemala and the Greater Antilles. There has apparently been no Central American record south of Guatemala prior to the present one. Dr. Stephen M. Russell of Louisiana State University has recently discovered a breeding area for Black Rails in British Honduras (pers. comm. with Mr. John Weske). This is the nearest known breeding location on the mainland.

450 Timberline Drive, Rancocas Woods, New Jersey