

## VOCALIZATIONS OF THE FEMALE BLACK RAIL

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The challenge of identifying confusing fall warblers is perhaps matched by that of recording and identifying controversial rail calls. Although the vocalization in the present study is not controversial, as outlined below, I have had considerable difficulty in locating and recording it on tape. In fact, it has also been difficult locating people who have heard the sounds. This article is to briefly summarize two published references to sounds made by the female Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*), to narrate a few experiences relayed to me by others, and to describe two limited personal experiences.

Arthur Trezevant Wayne described seeing a Black Rail entering an oat field and commencing a call described as "croo-croo-croo-o," the calls continuing for more than an hour. At the same time, answering calls were heard from a second bird, described as "kik,kik,kik,kik" or "kuk,kuk,kuk,kuk." When he captured the first bird, determined to be a female, the "croo" calls ceased. He returned later in the same day with a companion and a hunting dog and heard the "kik" or "kuk" calls for four or more hours before capturing the second bird, determined to be a male Black Rail (Wayne, A.T., "Breeding of the Little Black Rail (*Porzana jamaicensis*) in South Carolina," *The Warbler*, 1:33-35, 1905).

To clarify the calls to be described here from both the male and female, I must point out that the male's vocalizations above are clearly disturbance notes, and a brief comment on its "song" is in order. The commonly heard song of the male is a short phrase consisting of one, two or three (but generally two) high pitched notes followed by one lower pitched, with a phraseology such as "hee-hee-haw." Interestingly, P. H. Gosse commented that the "Little Red-eyed Crake" was called "Cacky-quaw" or "Jonny-Ho" or "Kitty Go" because of its cry (*Birds of Jamaica*, p. 376, 1847).

To my knowledge the first U.S. published information which accurately describes the Black Rail's song is in the Bent series (U.S. National Museum Bulletin 135, p. 331, 1926) in which the author states "Mr. T. E. McMullen tells me that the call of the black rail sounds like 'did-ee-dunk'—with accent on the last syllable." This agrees with my experience as to the phraseology. When I first recorded the song at Turkey Point (a brackish marsh area south of Dividing Creek, New Jersey), I believed that the emphasis was on the first syllables. Later, however, I heard the Black Rail's song from as close as about twelve feet and concluded that Mr. McMullen was right. The last lower pitched note does not carry as well as the higher ones, and on occasion only the higher pitched ones may be heard, particularly in windy weather.

A second and more recently published account of the female Black Rail vocalization was made by William Post and Frank Enders who heard a "cuckoo-like who-who-who" sound coming from Oak Beach Marsh on the south side of Great South Bay, Long Island, New York. This was on the night of 29-30 March, 1967. They trapped four Black Rails in April and May of the same year at this location. One of these, when in hand, gave a distress call, a

“who-who-who” resembling the call heard in March (W. Post and F. Enders, “Reappearance of the Black Rail on Long Island,” *The Kingbird*, 19:(4): 189-191, October, 1969). No mention was made in their paper concerning the sex of the bird which actually gave the call, but this is further evidence of this type of note actually coming from Black Rails. I would accept the published findings to date, beginning with Wayne’s account, that the female does give the ‘who-who’ type of call. We do not at this point know whether the male Black Rail gives that call.

My inquiries concerning the problem at hand have resulted in only two positive responses. Mr. Donald E. Kunkle of Cumberland County, New Jersey, reported hearing the “cuckoo” call at night on quite a number of occasions over the past six or eight years, mainly in the Turkey Point area. It has been heard much less frequently than the songs of the male. Secondly, Mr. Robert J. Miller of Philadelphia advised me that Thomas Dougherty, Paul DeAoun, and he heard the call periodically from 3:30 to 4:14 A.M., 23 April, 1966, at Elliott Island, Dorchester County, Maryland (personal correspondence, August, 1967). This area is currently considered to be one of the best locations to be fairly sure of hearing the male Black Rail song in April, or more certainly May or June.

Two other responses to my inquiries are those of Mr. John Weske and Mr. Joseph Hagar. Mr. Weske actually lived at Elliott Island during a special study of Black Rails from 23 April to 21 August, 1963. He heard the male song regularly but had no record of hearing a “cuckoo-like” call. Unfortunately, he was not at that time familiar with the report by Wayne that the female made such a call (personal correspondence, May, 1969). Mr. Hagar of Massachusetts, a long-time student of rail vocalizations, describes many different calls, disturbance notes, etc. but had not at the time of writing me been able to ascribe any “cuckoo-like” calls to the Black Rail (personal correspondence, August, 1967).

As to personal experiences, in spite of many all-night vigils in ‘rail’ marshes in Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey covering a period of some twelve years, I have heard the calls on only two occasions. On an overnight trip to Broadkill Beach, Kent County, Delaware, accompanied by Mr. James K. Meritt, one very short sequence of the female call was heard and tape recorded. This was at 10:00 P.M. on 27 May, 1967. The vocalization was a three-note “coo-coo-coo,” given so rapidly that the total time of the phrase was less than half a second. It was recorded only once. In fact, the call was so faint—or at such a distance—that I barely heard it and did not at the time realize what it was. My parabolic reflector-microphone setup was aimed at a distant singing male Black Rail, and later playbacks of the tape recording and louder, filtered copies from the original allowed closer study of the female call. Filtering minimized a loud chorus of insects and amphibians.

On the second occasion, Mr. Donald E. Kunkle alerted me to the presence of the calls at Turkey Point on 19 May, 1971. I immediately drove down, although the night was windy and unsuited for effective recording. Two different types of vocalizations were heard. The first, which I heard about

10:00 P.M. shortly after my arrival, was a fast series of six or seven “coo” notes, consecutively descending in pitch. This was heard only once and not recorded. The second type, from the same direction as the first, was a continuing series of two-note phrases. They were given with a cadence of delivery of about six seconds, or in the fashion “coo-coo——coo-coo——coo-coo——.” Each two-note phrase was given very quickly, as was the case with the Broadkill Beach bird. The two notes covered a span of less than half a second (this was determined from timing playbacks at one half and one quarter speed). During the above sequences songs of two or more male Black Rails were heard from the same general direction as the female calls.

It should be pointed out that the “cuckoo-like” expression used by Wayne refers to the Yellow-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus americanus*), at least for one of the female vocalizations which he heard. The sounds heard in the present study were to my ears more reminiscent of the song of the Black-billed Cuckoo (*Coccyzus erythrophthalmus*), although the cuckoo’s notes are given much more slowly than those of the female Black Rail. One other species, much more likely to be present in a nocturnal marsh habitat, is the Least Bittern (*Ixobrychus exilis*). Its ‘coo’ notes differ from those of the rail, first by usually including three to six or more notes within one series and secondly by changing in pitch during the series, generally rising and then falling. The female Black Rail notes in the continued series described above were on one pitch within the series.

In conclusion, a rather voluminous amount of time has been spent to hear and record the minuscule vocalization of a diminutive bird. It is hoped others will now hear this call and share their experiences with those persistent souls who may study the fascinating rails.

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