

### Black Rail *Laterallus jamaicensis*

One of the earliest casualties of the decimation and degradation of San Diego County's wetlands was the Black Rail, now extirpated. The California Department of Fish and Game has listed it as threatened statewide; small numbers persist only in the San Francisco Bay area, at Bodega, Tomales, and Morro bays, in the Imperial Valley, and along the lower Colorado River. The Black Rail was last known to nest in San Diego County in 1954; since then, only a dwindling number of vagrants has reached San Diego County, the last in 1983.

**Breeding distribution:** Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Black Rail occurred widely if possibly irregularly in San Diego County's coastal wetlands. It was known best from the tidal marshes of San Diego Bay, especially the estuary of the Sweetwater River (T10/U10), where Ingersoll (1909) estimated 30 pairs in 1908. "During some seasons, [E. E. Sechrist] estimated breeding populations of 25 to 30 pairs, [but] during other seasons he was unable to locate the species at all" (Willett 1933). The Black Rail was probably resident also at Mission Bay, where one was collected 22 June 1908, and in the Tijuana River estuary, where one was collected in November 1908 (Stephens 1909). In northern San Diego County, nesting was documented only at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7; 28 May 1952, eggs collected, WFVZ 17222), but Stephens reported a specimen also from Encinitas 8 December 1886 (SDNHM 148), which was probably shot at nearby San Elijo or Batiquitos lagoons.

In 1974, Paul Jorgensen discovered Black Rails at Carrizo Marsh (O29) in the Anza-Borrego Desert, with six to ten on 18 and 19 May and 8 June 1974 (AB 28:949, 1974). Four were detected 27 June 1976 (AB 30:1003, 1976), but the following September flooding from tropical storm Kathleen destroyed the marsh, and saltcedar dominated its recovery. Despite many searches, no Black Rails have been found there since 1976.

**Nesting:** San Diego Bay was the first known and long the only proven site of Black Rail nesting in the western United States. The birds built their nests in marshes of pickleweed, either on the ground underneath the pickleweed (and thus subject to flooding by high tides) or elevated within the pickleweed, though still screened under its canopy. See Huey (1916) for a photo of a nest and an account of his hunt for the birds and their nests. Egg dates (39) ranged from 12 March to 9 June.



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

**Migration:** Although the California subspecies of the Black Rail is nonmigratory, the birds do disperse across unsuitable habitat. Early records of such dispersers are of one killed by flying against the lighthouse on Point Loma 4 August 1876 (Grinnell et al. 1918) and another picked up under the towers of the former Chollas Heights Naval Radio Station (R11) 30 August 1929 (Gander 1930; SDNHM 12710).

**Winter:** Since 1970, the only reports of the Black Rail in San Diego have been of vagrants in the nonbreeding season: one at San Elijo Lagoon (L7) 28 October 1973 (A. Fries), another there 21 February 1983 (L. R. Santaella, AB 27:338, 1983), and one heard at a pond in San Felipe Valley near Paroli Spring (I21) 19 December 1983 (P. Unitt).

**Conservation:** Factors contributing to the Black Rail's extirpation from San Diego County include the destruction of most salt marsh and probably water pollution and an increase in predators. For refuge during high tides, Black Rails need a buffer of upland habitat, now practically eliminated around San Diego County's salt marshes. Around San Francisco and Tomales bays, where such a buffer is reduced, at high tide the rails become prey to Great Blue Herons, Great Egrets, Northern Harriers, Short-eared Owls, and gulls (Evens and Page 1986). The remaining population in southeastern California depends largely on seeps from irrigation canals, so efforts to improve the efficiency of water distribution by lining canals and pumping leaked water back into them reduces or eliminates Black Rail habitat (Evens et al. 1991).

**Taxonomy:** The California Black Rail, *L. j. coturniculus* (Ridgway, 1874), has a thinner bill, darker underparts, and more extensive chestnut on the nape than the subspecies of the eastern United States.