

WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

ENDANGERED AND THREATENED SPECIES SERIES

BLACK RAIL

Laterallus jamaicensis

ENDANGERED



Habitat: High coastal marshes (upper portions of salt and estuarine marshes that are irregularly flooded by tides) and wet meadows.

Weight: 2-2.75 ounces.

Length: 5-6 inches.

Wingspan: 10.5-11.5 inches.

Life Expectancy: 5-9 years of age.

Food: Insects, isopods (small marine crustaceans) and some seeds of aquatic vegetation.

Status: State endangered.

Identification: The smallest of all rails, the black rail is slate-colored, with a black bill, red eyes and a white-speckled back. The legs are moderately long and the toes are unwebbed. Black rails are often confused with the black-colored young of other rail species. However, young rails are glossy black, as opposed to the black rail's more subtle dark color. The sexes are similar. Black rails are usually silent, but during the breeding season, the male utters a series of metallic "kik" or "kuk" notes described as "kik-kik-kerr" and "kik-ee-doo." These notes are usually given at night.

Range: The black rail nests from southern New England to the Gulf States. It winters from the southern Atlantic coast states south to Central America.

Reproduction: Black rails nest in or along the edge of a marsh, usually in tall grass in open habitat. The nest is a deep cup of finely woven, soft grass, sedges or other available vegetation. It is usually concealed in a clump of green grass, with grasses arched over it so that it is hidden from above. The 6 to 10 buffy white eggs are dotted with brown. The incubation period is unknown, but probably lasts from 16 to 20 days.

Reason for Decline: Historically, high marsh habitats have been heavily exploited, first as haying and grazing areas, and then as areas to be filled for development. Although high marsh habitat is now protected by wetland laws, it has been reduced to a fraction of its former size.

Localized predation by cats, dogs, raccoons and skunks may also be a factor limiting black rail populations.

History in Connecticut: Southern New England is considered to be at the northeastern limit of the black rail's breeding range. Black rail nests were reported at several areas along the Connecticut River during the nineteenth century, but the secretive nature of the bird makes it difficult to estimate its true population status at that time. The difficulty in locating the black rail may still be responsible for its perceived scarcity.

Interesting Facts: Although all rails prefer to run from danger rather than fly, the black rail is probably the least likely to take wing. It usually darts for cover in the thick grasses of a marsh. Because of the black rail's secretive habits, its life history is poorly understood. Its elusiveness also makes it a much sought-after species by avid birdwatchers.

The name rail is derived from the Latin verb "raelare," which means "to scrape" and is a good description of one of the bird's vocalizations.

The male and female have distinctly different songs. They sing only at night just prior to and at the start of the breeding season.

Protective Legislation: *Federal* - Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. *State* - Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 26-311.

What You Can Do: Loss of habitat and localized predation are the greatest threats to Connecticut's black rail populations. Encourage the protection and conservation of Connecticut's remaining high coastal marshes. Illegal dumping and filling still occur despite wetland protection laws. Also, legal development near high marsh habitats may contribute to habitat degradation by affecting the dynamics of the salt marsh ecosystem.

CONNECTICUT RANGE

