



South Carolina

At Risk Species Series: Species facing threats to their survival

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Black Rail

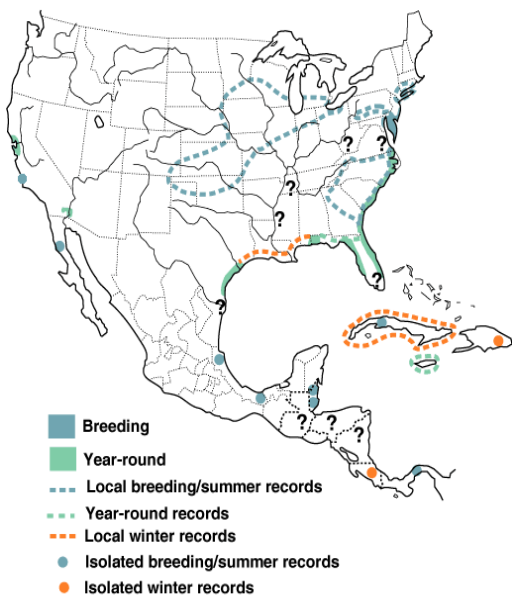
(*Laterallus jamaicensis*)



Black rail/NY Department of Environmental Conservation

Description

The smallest North American rail, black rails average 6 inches in length and 1.1 oz. in weight. Stocky and short-billed, birds have a dark gray to blackish head, gray neck and breast, rufous nape, and a black and white patterned back. Adult birds have scarlet red eyes (eyes are amber to hazel from birth to 3 months). Juvenile black rails are similar in appearance but duller overall. Breeding season (April-May) call is a three-noted “kickee-doo” or “kic-kic-ker”.



Range

Widespread in distribution, it's abundance is sparse. In South Carolina, the Eastern black rail subspecies (*Laterallus jamaicensis jamaicensis*) ranges throughout the Outer Coastal Plain with scattered inland records. Disjunct populations of the subspecies have been recorded as far west as Kansas. The Eastern black rail breeds from New York to Florida along the Atlantic Coast and from Florida to Texas along the Gulf Coast. In addition to wintering along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, breeding populations may winter in Cuba and the West Indies. The other subspecies, the California black rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis coturniculus*), breeds in California and Arizona.

Habitat

Black rails occupy the upper zone of tidal marshes (high marsh) along the Atlantic Coast. Inundated only during extreme high tide events, high marsh is dominated by plants such as salt meadow hay (*Spartina patens*), saltgrass (*Distichlis spicata*), and interspersed with shrubs such as marsh elder (*Iva frutescens*) or groundsel tree (*Baccharis hamifolia*). Additional habitat features: salt pannes (higher saline patches dominated by *Salicornia* spp.) and patches of needlerushes (*Juncus* spp.).

Status

Not currently protected by the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) was petitioned in April 2010 to list the species. A 90-day finding by the Service found that listing may be warranted. The Service will be making a 12-month finding on the species by September 2018.

Black rails are listed by the state of South Carolina as a species of Special Concern. They are also listed as a high priority spe-

cies in the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture's—South Atlantic Migratory Bird Initiative (SAMBI). Population estimates range from 5,000 to 50,000 individuals, likely declining but unknown as to what extent. (Breeding Bird Survey Data: USFWS)

Threats

Loss and degradation of suitable wetland habitat poses the greatest threat to black rails. Coastal populations probably declined drastically between the 1920s and 1970s, prior to laws being enacted to protect coastal wetlands. Alteration of water regimes can allow undesirable vegetation to invade higher sections of salt marshes, degrading rail habitat. Predation of adults and young is also of concern.

Management/Protection Needs

The species benefits from programs to preserve and enhance wetlands. Such programs should be encouraged for conservation of black rails. Continue survey efforts to clarify status.

References

- The Center for Conservation Biology: Eastern Black Rail Conservation & Management Working Group
- Eddleman, W. R., R. E. Flores, and M. Legare. 1994. Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*). In *The Birds of North America*, No. 123 (A. Poole and F. Gill, Eds.).
- Post, W. and S.A. Gauthreaux. 1989. Status and distribution of South Carolina birds.

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