

## Black Rail *Laterallus jamaicensis*



**Folk Name:** Black Crake

**Status:** Migrant (former sporadic Breeder)

**Abundance:** Casual

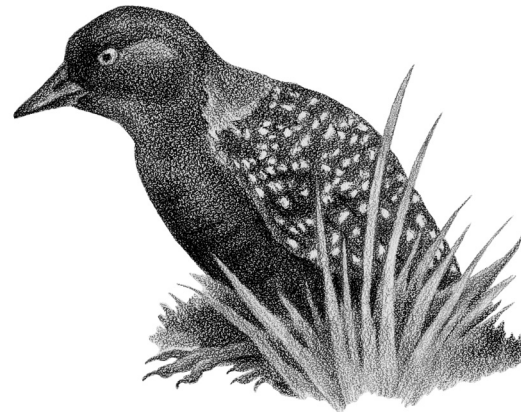
**Habitat:** Wet meadows

At 6 inches, this extremely small and elusive rail measures only an inch larger than the American Goldfinch. According to the Center for Conservation Biology in Virginia, over the past several decades populations of Black Rail have plummeted dramatically in the eastern United States. At least 75% of the original breeding population is believed to have been lost. Land-use impacts and climate change appear to be the most plausible culprits in this tragedy.

The Black Rail once bred in wetlands scattered throughout North Carolina, including in counties in the Piedmont and Mountain regions. One of our earliest local ornithologists, R.B. McLaughlin, reported Black Rail breeding in Iredell County in the 1880s but he did not record a specific date. Today, however, the Black Rail only breeds at scattered sites in eastern North Carolina, and it is a very scarce transient in this part of the state. Dave Lee, former Curator of Birds at the North Carolina Museum of Natural Sciences, suggested that:

Black Rails expanded their breeding distribution into inland sites as a result of post-Civil War agricultural practices and disappeared from those sites when agricultural practices changed.

There are three additional records of this bird being found in the region. Leverett Loomis recovered a specimen of an adult female that had been killed with a pitch fork “in a little hillside sink” in Chester County on September 3, 1887. The first documentation of the presence of Black Rail in Mecklenburg County was also confirmed by the collection of a voucher specimen. Professor Dick Brown and his students conducted a tower kill survey of a television tower in eastern Mecklenburg County on September 2, 1979. They discovered a single Black Rail at the base of the tower mixed in with a variety of songbird



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species killed there the previous night. Brown collected the specimen and deposited it as specimen #B671 in the zoological collection housed at UNC Charlotte’s Biology Department.

In addition to these specimens, we have two sight reports of this elusive bird. On May 27, 1997, David Wright observed a Black Rail skulking in a small marsh on the Westmoreland Farm, just east of the Town of Davidson, in northeastern Mecklenburg County. The dominant vegetation in the marsh was black needlerush grass (*Juncus* sp.). Wright’s report noted that he never heard the bird vocalize. This sight record was reviewed by the Mecklenburg County Bird Records Committee and was determined acceptable for addition to the county bird list based upon the details provided and the experience of the observer who submitted the report.

A Black Rail was reported at the Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge on January 2, 2000, by observers conducting the annual Christmas Bird Count. No details were provided and this report should be considered hypothetical as the time of year is inconsistent with other data.

The Black Rail is listed on the Red Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a “species with extremely high vulnerability” to extinction. It is in need of immediate and significant conservation action.