

King Rail *Rallus elegans*



Folk Name: Fresh-water Marsh Hen
Status: Migrant (Former Breeder)
Abundance: Formerly rare now casual
Habitat: Marshes

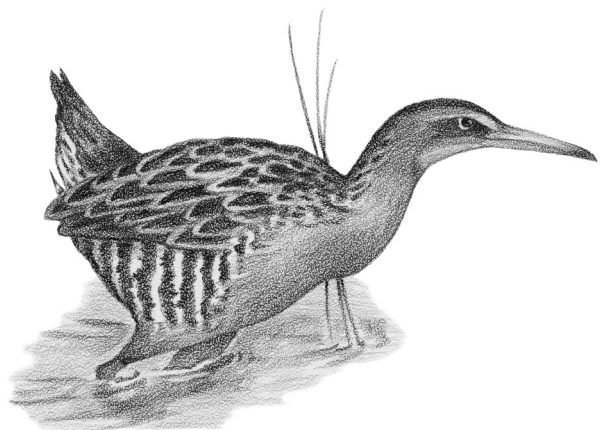
Note: Recent genetic studies by avian taxonomists have provided evidence that the King Rail and the Clapper Rail are possibly variants of the same species.

The King Rail was once considered both a migrant and a scattered summer resident in freshwater marshes throughout the Carolina Piedmont. We have reports from May through August. There are also two records from the winter season. The first is a King Rail that was located near Charlotte on February 10, 1940.

In a report submitted to the U.S. Biological Survey in 1940, Charlie Sellers noted a King Rail in Charlotte on 12 May and again on 15 May and specified that the bird was a breeding resident. Elmer Brown discovered a King Rail nest in Mecklenburg County on May 15, 1941. The nest contained “downy young.” Two years later, Elizabeth Clarkson noted that King Rails in Mecklenburg County “nest in marshy ground and place their nests of grass on the ground.”

In 1945, Jim Layton shared two additional nest records of this species in Charlotte:

On May 4, 1945 I found a King Rail’s nest with ten eggs within the city limits of Charlotte. The nest was in a clump of wire grass about three hundred feet from the Briar Creek, and within twenty feet of an old dirt road. When found it was over several inches of standing water which later dried out. On May 5th, there were still ten eggs, but on the 6th, there were eleven. On May 7, I found that something had destroyed most of the eggs, leaving the shells scattered about. The three eggs that were undamaged I tried to hatch by putting them in a box with a light bulb. I almost succeeded, because later examination showed that one of the chicks had developed until the black down was beginning to show. On May 30, and again on June 4, I saw another King Rail leading a set of at least four young along



the banks of Briar Creek, about a quarter of a mile above the point where the nest was found.

Flo Cobey and Joe Norwood reported finding a King Rail in Charlotte on May 1, 1957, and Katherine Peeler observed a King Rail in Newell on August 8, 1959. There is also a historic nest record from Cleveland County that was submitted to David Wray at the North Carolina State Museum in the late 1950s.

The King Rail was considered an “uncommon” breeding resident of Mecklenburg County until the 1970s. It remains unclear when the local breeding population disappeared. No evidence of the King Rail breeding was found during the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas survey. Therefore, it has been added to the “Lost” bird list for Mecklenburg County.

We have received only a single report from the region since 1959. Two King Rails were reported by Jeff Lemons and Tim McGreal at the Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge in Anson County on December 31, 2011. The birds responded to a recording played at a stop at a marshy area along Wildlife Drive.

The King Rail is listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a species with both “troubling” population declines and “high threats.” It is in need of conservation action.