

Virginia Rail *Rallus limicola*



Folk Name: Little Marsh Hen

Status: Migrant and rare Winter Visitor

Abundance: Rare

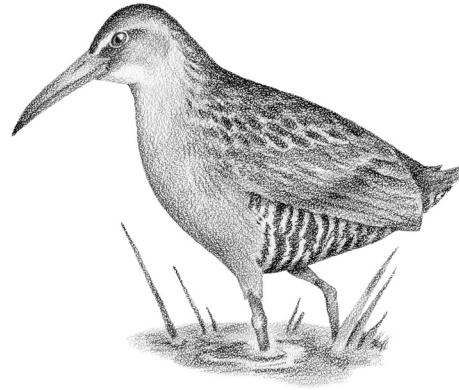
Habitat: Marshes

The Virginia Rail is a regular migrant in the Central Carolinas in both spring and fall. However, like our other rails, it is seldom seen. Our spring dates range from 20 March to 5 May with all but these two records recorded in April. Fall sightings have been reported from 12 September through 8 November with almost all the sightings reported in October. The Virginia Rail is occasionally found in winter here. We have about 10 records from the month of December and one from January. Most winter reports have come from Christmas Bird Counts.

Leverett Loomis reported the Virginia Rail as a migrant in Chester County in the late 1800s. He noted that this 9-½-inch rail “frequents swampy meadows overgrown with tall grass.” Rhett Chamberlain reported one near Charlotte on October 4, 1947. John Trott captured an injured Virginia Rail in Stanly County on April 24, 1956.

Joe Norwood discovered a dead Virginia Rail at the base of a tower in Mecklenburg County on October 19, 1957. He examined the carcass carefully and, based on the advanced state of decomposition and the weather for the past few weeks, Norwood estimated the bird struck the tower and died on the night of 4 October. The specimen was too badly damaged to salvage. Another Virginia Rail, described as in “full plumage,” hit Charlotte’s WSOC tower on the night of October 10, 1959, and was collected the following day.

A Virginia Rail was spotted by local Audubon members in Charlotte on March 20, 1982. Dave Frech found a Virginia Rail in Charlotte on May 5, 1984. Flo Cobey reported one calling near Creeches’ Pond in York County on December 26, 1987, providing our first winter record. David Wright found at least three Virginia Rails in a marsh at the Martin-Marietta (Vulcan) Quarry off Nations Ford Road on April 14, 1990, and had one calling at the same location that winter on December 29–30, 1990. The Virginia Rail was found on Christmas Bird



Counts in the region in 1987, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1994, 1999, and 2004.

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Virginia Rail has been reported in the region at least once in more than half (56%) of the years. Most of these birds were found after playing a recording of their call over a speaker. One bird was examined up close. Linn Finger reported finding a Virginia Rail that had collided with the Duke Energy building in downtown Charlotte during migration on April 22, 2014. The bird was stunned, but it appeared to recover and eventually flew off.



Virginia Rail escaping controlled burn in a field at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge. (MCPRD staff)