

A PAIR OF VIRGINIA RAILS IN CIMARRON COUNTY, OKLAHOMA

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The Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) passes though Oklahoma during migration, with some birds at least occasionally remaining to nest at favorable locations. A few also probably sojourn in certain marshy spots in the state during most winters (e.g., see Stegall, E., *Am. Birds* 40:889, 1986; 41:1067, 1987; 42:964, 1988; 45:865, 1991; 46:859, 1992; and 47:830, 1993). Breeding records are known for the following counties: Beaver, Alfalfa, Washita (record from 1860, county only probable) and Tulsa (Sutton, G.M. [1982], Species summaries of Oklahoma bird records, Oklahoma Mus. Nat. Hist., Univ. Oklahoma, Norman).

Near noon on 28 May 1993, the authors were searching for birds below the dam of Lake Carl Etling in Black Mesa State Park, Cimarron County, Oklahoma. In this semi-arid western end of the Panhandle are few places suitable for rails, but the habitat here was ideal: a sluggish, cattail-choked stream about 50 feet wide. The few open channels were apparently maintained by the muskrats (*Ondatra zibethica*) we noticed there. Skies were partly cloudy, and little wind offered relief from temperatures in the mid-eighties.



Not germane to the incident described in the lead article, this rail was captured by John G. Newell on a 6-foot high window ledge in downtown Oklahoma City on 13 September 1974. Photograph was taken later that day by John S. Shackford, when Newell released the apparently healthy bird at Lake Hefner.

After Shackford had begun "squeaking" to attract birds, we suddenly heard an abrupt series of four or five loud, descending "grunts" from the marsh. When we investigated the source, we caught several glimpses of a dark bird about the size of a Northern Bobwhite (*Colinus virginianus*) as it darted in and out of the rank cattail growth. When we finally saw it well, we noted its reddish-brown upperparts, grayish venter, and vertical white bars on the black flanks. The stubby tail was held upright. The bill was about two inches long and showed much orange, especially on the lower mandible. Once in a while, a second Virginia Rail, which we managed to observe several times, sounded off from farther out in the marsh. We presumed it to be the male.

Tyler waded out into the cattails. His close approach to the nearest bird (presumed female) evoked fanned, lowered wings and "bark-like" scoldings. "Squeaking" also triggered this display, which we instigated several times. Unlike the usually shy behavior of rails, these birds sometimes stood totally exposed only a few feet away. We therefore strongly suspected that the pair's eggs or young were close by. Tyler thoroughly searched the area most closely guarded by the first bird, but failed to find the nest. We left the area at 1330.

We returned to this location at 0930 on 29 May but failed to hear or see either rail. However, that evening at 2210 and 2225, we heard a Virginia Rail give a series of "grunts" from a marshy spot about 200 feet to the east. This bird was responding to the taped call of a Sora (*Porzana carolina*), after refusing to respond to that of its own species. We had no way of knowing for certain whether or not this latest rail was one of the original pair. Other listeners present that evening were James L. Norman, Jeri A. McMahon, John Sterling and Melissa M. Nagel.

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GENERAL NOTES

Importance of playa lakes in the Oklahoma Panhandle to migratory water birds. — Temporary playa lakes form in the high plains after periods of heavy rainfall. These catch-basins are important feeding and resting stopover sites for migrating water birds. However, some current agricultural practices tend to eliminate their availability. A prior note (W.M. Davis, *Bull. Oklahoma Ornithol. Soc.* 22:27, 1989) described an extraordinary aggregation of migrating White-faced Ibises (*Plegadis chiliti*) at a playa in Texas County, Oklahoma, on 16 August 1988. Additional species seen there concurrently are also of interest. The playa is located 6.4 km (4 mi) east of Hardesty and is bisected by State Highway 3. A description of its extent and conditions on that day is found in the above-cited report.

Remarkable besides the ibises was the presence of 15 species of plovers and sandpipers. The most noteworthy of these were four Piping Plovers (*Charadrius melodus*), which were identified at 20 m distance. There is little doubt that they were of the Northern Great Plains population, which is classified as "threatened." The species is rarely reported from northwestern Oklahoma (J.A. Grzybowski, *et al.* Date guide to the occurrences of birds in Oklahoma, 2nd. Ed., Oklahoma