

INTERACTION BETWEEN VIRGINIA RAIL AND BLACK RAIL

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On 14 October 2000, just after first light, a Black Rail was observed in a marsh near the Dauphin Island airport by Russell Bailey, Alice Christensen, Charles Duncan, Dana Hamilton, Stan Hamilton, Ralph Havard, John O'Neill, Dick Reynolds, Harriet Wright and me. A short time later, just before 0700 hr, plaintive, rapid peeping alerted the group to a Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) which had a flailing Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*) in its bill. The Black Rail was identified by its small size, primary black coloration and fully-feathered wings, eliminating the slim possibility of a late chick of some other rail species. The Virginia Rail soon disappeared in the marsh with its apparent prey and neither was heard again. There were no subsequent reports of a Black Rail from that marsh on that day.

Thus, the Virginia Rail was either trying to drive the Black Rail from the area or consume it. Virginia Rails are tolerant of sharing habitat with at least some other rail species. Pospichal and Marshall (1954) and Horak (1970) reported Virginia Rails to be tolerant of Soras (*Porzana carolina*). The diets of Virginia Rails and Black Rails appear to be no more similar (Eddleman, Flores and Legare 1994, Conway 1996), so one might expect a similar tolerance. Of course, the size differential would make it easier for Virginia Rails to dominate Black Rails than for them to dominate Soras.

Virginia Rails primarily eat invertebrates, small fish and frogs and seeds of marsh plants. No accounts of Virginia Rails eating other birds could be found in the literature. However, Vincent Lucas (pers. comm.) offered an unpublished account of one eating a Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) on South Padre Island, Texas. Moreover, feeding experiments conducted on an exhausted Virginia Rail captured in the north on a bitterly cold day demonstrated its ability to subdue and consume large prey items ranging from large insects to some species of sunfish and a Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis*) (Cahn 1915). Interestingly, there are records of three Virginia Rail congeners preying on birds, often involving birds that were in some sense artificially easy prey. Water Rails (*Rallus aquaticus*) have been documented taking Winter Wren (*Troglodytes troglodytes*), Little Stints (*Calidris minuta*), a probable Chaffinch (*Fringilla coelebs*), a probable Dunnock (*Prunella modularis*) and several birds in a single aviary:

Chinese Quail (*Excalfactoria chinensis*), Greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*), Orange-cheeked Waxbill (*Estrilda melpoda*). King Rails (*Rallus elegans*) have been found with Red-winged Blackbird (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) feathers and vertebrae in their guts (Meanley 1956). Clapper Rails (*Rallus longirostris*) have been found to eat Willow Flycatchers (*Empidonax trailli*) and Savannah Sparrows (*Passerculus sanwicensis*) that had been caught in a bird net (Spendelow and Spendelow 1980, Jorgensen and Ferguson 1982).

Black Rails have also been documented to fall prey to Great Egrets (*Ardea alba*), Great Blue Herons (*Ardea herodias*), Northern Harriers (*Circus cyaneus*), Great Horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*), Short-eared Owls (*Asio flammeus*), Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*) and possibly Loggerhead Shrikes (*Lanius ludovicianus*) (Evans and Page 1986, Orr 1947, Eddleman et al. 1994). This observation suggests that Virginia Rails may also belong to this list of Black Rail predators.

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