

Photo Salon

Geographic Variation in Clapper Rails

Photos by:

Naomi Blinick • Jim Burns • Diana Doyle • Howard Eskin
Corey Finger • Marco Antonio González Bernal
Bob Gress • Laura Jaskot • Jeff McDonald
Robert Ostrowski • Jenny E. Ross • James Warren

I live in Colorado, where there are no Clapper Rails. No Clapper Rails, no coastal marshes, no tides—there's none of that in Colorado. I would be excused for imagining that the Clapper Rail is just some dumpy brown bird that wanders through the cordgrass and makes clacking sounds; ya seen one Clapper Rail, ya seen 'em all. I would also be quite wrong.

As Paul Hess explains on pp. 25–26 of this issue, the Clapper Rail is fascinatingly diverse. Or maybe I should say, the clapper-rails are fascinatingly diverse; Hess reports that the taxon currently classified as the Clapper Rail may be a complex of multiple species. That's an exciting result, and Hess explains it with admirable clarity. But you (and I) are left wondering: Really? Are they really all that different?

Well, yes. The scientists say so. Case closed, I suppose. But that's not actually how you and I experience variety and diversity in Clapper Rails (or clapper-rails) and other birds. No, we go out and see them with our own eyes, and then we tell stories in our own words. Hence, the photos and vignettes on the pages that follow.

The gray Clappers of the Northeast are so different from the orangey birds of the Pacific Coast; compare Corey Finger's subtle study of the colorless Brooklyn bird (p. 39) with Jim Burns' beauty from Palo Alto (p. 31). Likewise, our human perspectives and experiences differ; contrast the outlook of Diana Doyle (p. 33) with that of Jennie Duberstein (p. 30). And of course the birds (and their genes) are separated by tremendous geographic distance; it's a long way from Sonora (pp. 29 and 37) and Sinaloa (p. 30) to New Jersey (pp. 36, 38, and 39) and Virginia (p. 32).

I'll pose the question again: Are they really all that different? The answer, in the words and pictures that follow, is a resounding yes.

—Ted Floyd
Editor, *Birding*





Estero Santa Cruz, Sonora; June 2010. Photo by © Naomi Blinick.

Wetlands in northwestern Mexico and the southwestern U.S. provide important habitat to two subspecies of the Clapper Rail: *yumanensis* (“Yuma Rail”) and *levipes* (“Light-footed Rail”). The Yuma Rail, the only freshwater Clapper Rail, uses marshes along the lower Colorado River, in the lower Gila River basin, along the lower Virgin River, and at the Salton Sea in the U.S., and at the Ciénega de Santa Clara in the Colorado River delta and in mangrove marshes along the coast of Sonora in Mexico. The Light-footed Rail occurs in coastal marshes and lagoons along the coast of southern California and northern Baja California. The Yuma Rail is classified as endangered in the U.S. and threatened in Mexico, while the Light-footed Rail is classified as endangered in both countries.

A diverse partnership in northwestern Mexico and the southwestern United States has been conducting marsh bird surveys since 1999. Using standardized monitoring protocols developed by the Arizona Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, a collaboration of Pronatura Noroeste, the Sonoran Joint Venture, the Mexican National Commission for Natural Protected Areas, and the Centro de Investigación Científica y de Educación Superior de Ensenada, Baja California, has conducted surveys in more than 30 coastal wetland systems in northwestern Mexico. These surveys have demonstrated the importance of the Ciénega de Santa Clara to Yuma Rails, home to approximately 95% of the world’s population, nearly 6,000 individuals. Similar surveys conducted in California and Baja California show that Light-footed Rail populations, which had declined to a low of just 203 pairs in 1980, had more than doubled by 2011, to at least 441 pairs.

The small populations of both of these subspecies, combined with increasing pressures on their limited habitats, mean that they remain extremely vulnerable. Wetlands in the region face numerous threats, including human development, aquaculture, water management practices, invasive species, predation, wildfires, sea level rise, and contaminants. The conservation of both Yuma and Light-footed rails requires international collaboration to secure water for key wetland areas and the implementation of habitat management and restoration strategies to ensure the long-term survival of these subspecies.

—Jennie Duberstein

Sonoran Joint Venture Education and Outreach Coordinator
ABA Young Birder Liaison



Santuario Tortuguero Playa Ceuta, Sinaloa; February 2012. Photo by © Marco Antonio González Bernal.



Palo Alto Baylands, California; November 1995. Photo by © Jim Burns.



Hampton, Virginia; June 2011. Photo by © Diana Doyle.



High Island, Texas; April 2013. Photo by © Bob Gress.

As far as I can see, it's a vast saltwater prairie of cordgrass. This is the habitat of the Atlantic Clapper Rail, an ecosystem that covers 10 million acres along the Southeast coastal plain. It's a harsh environment, highly saline and subject to diurnal tides that flood it with up to eight feet of salt water, then drain it to bake in the hot southern sun. Not many species can tolerate these conditions, yet the Clapper Rail does so, year-round.

Having just finished spending two years on a boat in the coastal plain, I consider the Clapper Rail to be my “yard bird.” If we're docked at a sheltered marina, which means surrounded by cordgrass, the staccato calls of the Clapper Rails burst out randomly, day and night. They scurry like yard chickens under the wooden docks, not shy, but hard to see with all that grass. The best chance of seeing a Clapper is during an early-morning or late-evening low tide, when they're more likely to come down out of the grass to the muddy edges of a tidal slough.

The old-timers call them marsh hens, and here they are a game bird. Hunting is typically done by poling during an unusually high tide, called a “hen tide” because the Clappers get flooded out to high-ground hammocks. During these extreme tides, I've seen a Clapper Rail walking on a raft of detritus, adrift until the tide releases its muddy territory.

When the tide finally ebbs, the Clappers return to ramble through their cordgrass habitat in the company of marsh snails, mud fiddler crabs, Marsh Wrens, and Seaside Sparrows.

—Diana Doyle
“Tools of the Trade” columnist, *Birding*

CLAPPER RAILS



Truitt's Landing, Maryland; June 2013. *Photo by © Robert Ostrowski.*
(Note: These images show a Clapper Rail–King Rail pair.)



Salton Sea, California; May 2006. *Photo by © Jenny E. Ross.*

Yuma, Arizona; April 2007. *Photo by © Jim Burns.*



CLAPPER RAILS

Avalon, New Jersey; May 2010. Photo by © James Warren.





South Padre
Island, Texas;
November 2012.
*Photo by ©
Jeff McDonald.*



Estero Santa Cruz,
Sonora; January 2013.
Photo by © Naomi Blinick.



Brigantine, New Jersey; June 2013. Photo by © Laura Jaskot.



Brigantine,
New Jersey;
August 2010.
Photo by
© Howard
Eskin.

Brooklyn, New York; September 2010. Photo by © Corey Finger-10,000 Birds.