



SAN FRANCISCO
ESTUARY INVASIVE
SPARTINA PROJECT



Preserving native wetlands

California clapper rail

Rallus longirostris obsoletus



M. Taylor

Description

The California clapper rail (*Rallus longirostris obsoletus*) is a Federal Endangered Species (Federal Register 35: 1604; October 13, 1970) and also a California state fully protected species. It is one of the largest members of the family rallidae and is 13-19 inches in height. Males are slightly larger than females. It is hen-like in appearance, with a long slightly decurved bill. It has olive-brown upper parts, cinnamon-buff breast, dark flanks crossed by white bars and white undertail coverts.

Clapper rail and Virginia rail (*Rallus limicola*) are the most morphologically similar rail that may occur in marshes. Clapper rail are larger and lack the characteristic gray cheeks of the Virginia rail.

The California clapper rail breeding season begins in February; nesting typically in March through May, but may extend into August. Clutch size range from 5-14 eggs. Both male and female share in incubation and chick rearing.



FWS Photo

Behavior

Clapper rail are secretive birds and if disturbed typically freeze, hide in small sloughs, under overhangs or in dense vegetation. They rapidly run through vegetation using slough as corridors. When flushed they may fly only a short distance before landing. They swim well, however typically only to cross sloughs or escape threats at high tide.

Clapper rail are most active at sunrise and sunset when they forage in marsh vegetation along channels and mudflat edges.

Distribution

Clapper rail occur within a range of salt and brackish marshes. They are currently restricted to the marshes of the San Francisco Estuary. In the North Bay, clapper rail live in tidal brackish marshes, while in the South Bay they typically inhabit pickleweed (*Salicornia virginica*) and cordgrass (*Spartina spp.*) dominated salt marshes.

Special considerations in relation to invasive *Spartina*

The California clapper rail forage in channel habitat and nest in native high marsh pickleweed (*Salicornia virginica*) marsh and gum plant (*Grindelia stricta*) lining channel edge habitat, both of which may be displaced and altered by the introduced *Spartina* species. Non-native *S. alterniflora*-hybrids invade channels and accrete sediment. New, steep sided channels are cut through roots and rhizomes replacing gently sloping channel flats used by Clapper rail for foraging and as escape routes from predators.

Color infrared aerial photography shows invasive *Spartina* growing in channels and sloughs as bright orange.



ISP Photo



Marsh Rail Comparison Table



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| Species | California clapper rail | Virginia rail | Black Rail | Sora |
|-------------|--|---|---|---|
| Character | <i>Rallus longirostris obsoletus</i> *** | <i>Rallus limicola</i> | <i>Laterallus Jamaicensis</i> * | <i>Porzana carolina</i> |
| Height | • 14-16 in (35-40 cm) | • 9 in (23 cm) | • 5-6 in (13-15 cm) | • 8-9 ³ / ₄ in (20-24 cm) |
| Description | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large tan and gray • Long, slightly decurved bill • Barred flanks • White pattern under short cocked tail | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small rusty, or buffy rail with gray cheeks • Black bars • Long, slightly decurved reddish bill | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tiny blackish rail • Nape deep chestnut <p><i>Caution:</i> all young rails in downy plumage are black</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small plump gray brown rail short yellow bill • Black patch on the face and throat |
| Voice | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clattering kek-kek-kek-kek or cha-cha-cha • When alarmed, may respond with “clapping” call | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Wak-wak-wak” descending or “kidick, kidick” and various kicking and grunting sounds | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Males call “kiki-doo” or “kiki-krrr” • Secretive bird more likely heard rather than seen | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A descending whinny; in spring “ker-wee” |
| Habitat | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Salt marsh and brackish marshes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fresh and brackish marshes; in winter, also in salt marshes | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tidal salt and brackish marshes (coast) (grassy marshes inland) • Generally found in San Pablo/Suisun Bays, fall-winter if San Francisco Bay | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fresh marshes, wet meadows; in winter, also salt marshes |

Data sources: http://sacramento.fws.gov/es/animal_spp_acct/clapper_rail.htm ; Peterson, R.T. And V. Peterson. 1990. Field Guide To Western Birds a Completely New 3RD Edition. Houghton Mifflin, Boston, MA.

★ State threatened and fully protected species.

✳ Federally endangered species.

Four species of invasive *Spartina*, commonly called cordgrasses, are rapidly spreading and establishing in the salt marshes and mud flats in the San Francisco Estuary. First introduced twenty–five years ago, non-native *Spartina* populations have now spread to more than one thousand acres. Invasive *Spartina* can significantly alter the estuary both physically and biologically in ways which imperil the ecological balance and diversity of fragile habitats.

The rapid establishment and spread of invasive *Spartina* throughout the estuary is now of regional concern. The Invasive *Spartina* Project, administered by the California Coastal Conservancy, brings together citizens, resource managers and scientists in the Bay Area to find the best solutions to reduce and eliminate populations of invasive *Spartina*.

For more information please contact:

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