

BIRD OF THE MONTH

By Gail Cleveland

THE VIRGINIA RAIL

Virginia Rails are solitary, seldom-seen birds of the marsh, but if you ever see them in a group, they will probably be in migration or out in the open because of flooding in their home range. If you are lucky enough to see them in a group, you will have seen a reel of rails. Wow! A Scottish dance of wetland creatures. Personally, I have rarely seen a solitary Virginia Rail, but each experience has been a memorable one.

Their closest, more visible relative in our area is the American Coot, who is often seen in large numbers swimming in summer ponds; another elusive relative is the Sora who, like the Virginia Rail, inhabits our wetlands along ponds and streams. All three have feet similar to a chicken, although the Coot has lobbed feet, but none are webbed like ducks, in spite of their watery habitat. Small stubby tails are indicative of all members of this family which has 140 species worldwide, 10 of which are now extinct.

My first view of a rail was early in the "birding experience" years for my husband Bruce and me. We had stopped at the Bowdoin Wildlife Refuge in Eastern Montana near Malta. On one of our walks, we heard a most unusual descending whinny coming from the reeds in front of us. After searching our field guide, we were quite sure that we were near a Sora. Rails and their close relatives, like the Sora, are very vocal, although secretive. After listening and waiting quietly, we caught sight of a small, gray bird with a short tail racing soundlessly through the reeds ahead of us. One glimpse---that is the usual view one gets of a rail. The Sibley guide says that Virginia Rails and Soras sometimes walk and feed in full view. This is rare in my experience.

My first sight of a Virginia Rail was in full view; however, the circumstances were not the norm. Bruce



and I had heard one at a lower Flathead Valley pond. The call is as distinctive as the Sora's. It can be described as a piglike grunting, both descending and accelerating. Frustrated by our inability

to see the secretive bird, we returned with tape recorder in hand, hoping to persuade one into view. We played the tape of its call; Mr. Rail responded. As we looked out the car window, frustration set in again. No movement; no more calls. I happened to look down for a moment. There he was, right next to the car, and he was beautiful! Long red bill, rich reddish breast with striped black and white flanks. What a treat! He had followed the call to its origin.



And then he was gone, melting into the marsh vegetation. Audubon wrote of his relative the Clapper Rail in his *Birds of America* (1842): "On the least appearance of danger, they lower the head, stretch out the neck, and move off with incomparable speed, always in perfect silence . . . they have the power of compressing their body to such a degree as frequently to force a passage between two stems so close that one could hardly believe it possible for them to squeeze themselves through." Thin as a Rail!

Virginia Rails dine on snails, earthworms, insects and occasionally fish. Although Virginia Rails have short wings and rarely are seen in flight, they do migrate long distances to the southern United States and Mexico. They can swim to get away from predators, but prefer walking on land to flying or swimming.

In their home range, the male will put on quite a display for the female during the breeding season. With his short wings open and raised above his body, he runs before the female twitching his tail quickly. At each pass, he rises to full height, bows and the female bows in return. Courtship feeding and mutual preening ensues. Their nests are a pile of matted reeds and other vegetation and often concealed with a reed or sedge canopy. Their young are black fluffs that can swim immediately after hatching and are fed by the adults for two or three weeks.

So, when you tire of the visible, easy to see, brightly colored warblers, tanagers, and hummingbirds, take to the marshes and, hopefully, catch a glimpse of a Sora or a Virginia Rail, two northwestern Montana species of this unique wetland family of birds, the *Rallidae*.