

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

BLACK RAIL

Laterallus jamaicensis

Family: RALLIDAE
B143

Order: GRUIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

Rarely seen, scarce, yearlong resident of saline, brackish, and fresh emergent wetlands in the San Francisco Bay area, Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, coastal southern California at Morro Bay and a few other locations, the Salton Sea, and lower Colorado River area. Formerly a local resident in coastal wetlands from Santa Barbara Co. to San Diego Co.; still winters there rarely. Significant loss of saltwater and freshwater wetland habitat in recent decades probably has reduced population (Wilbur 1974a). The majority of breeders in the San Francisco Bay area located in San Pablo Bay (Evens et al. 1991). Loss of higher wetland around San Francisco Bay apparently has eliminated breeding in the south bay area (Manolis 1977).

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Carnivorous; gleans isopods, insects, and other arthropods from surface of mud and vegetation.

Cover: Occurs most commonly in tidal emergent wetlands dominated by pickleweed, or in brackish marshes supporting bulrushes in association with pickleweed. In freshwater, usually found in bulrushes, cattails, and saltgrass. Usually found in immediate vicinity of tidal sloughs (Manolis 1977). Typically occurs in the high wetland zones near upper limit of tidal flooding, not in low wetland areas with considerable annual and/or daily fluctuations in water levels. Along Colorado River, prefers dense bulrush stands, shallow water, and gently sloping shorelines (Repking and Ohmart 1977). During extreme high tides, may depend on upper wetland zone and adjoining upland or freshwater wetland vegetation for cover.

Reproduction: Nest concealed in dense vegetation, often pickleweed, near upper limits of tidal flooding (Stephens 1909). Builds a deep, loose cup, at ground level or elevated several inches.

Water: No additional information found.

Pattern: Dependent upon upper zones of saline emergent wetlands, especially with pickleweed, and brackish fresh emergent wetlands.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: No data found, but apparently circadian activity pattern. California Black Rails vocalize mainly at dusk and occasionally in daylight hours. Rarely heard at night (Flores and Eddleman 1991).

Seasonal Movements/Migration: California population apparently resident. Occasionally found away from wetlands in late summer and autumn, suggesting some post-breeding

movement (Wilbur 1974a, Ripley 1977). May winter in locations where it does not breed (Manolis 1978, Garrett and Dunn 1981).

Home Range: Little information available. Repking and Ohmart (1977) reported densities of 1.1 to 1.6/ha (0.4 to 0.6/ac) in spring, and 0.7/ha (0.3/ac) in winter, on the lower Colorado River. In Arizona, California black rails used home ranges averaging 0.4 +/- 0.2 ha and rarely overlapped (Flores 1991).

Territory: Little information available; will respond to recorded calls, especially in breeding season.

Reproduction: Nests with eggs reported from 12 March to 4 June (Bent 1926, Wilbur 1974a). Single-brooded. Clutch size in California averaged 6 eggs; range = 3-8 (Dawson 1923, Wilbur 1974a). Reported to abandon nest if disturbed before completing clutch (Huey 1916, Heaton 1937).

Niche: Predators include herons and domestic cats. Occasionally found dead from collisions with powerlines, smokestacks, transmission towers, autos.

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Life history accounts for species in the California Wildlife Habitat Relationships (CWHR) System were originally published in: Zeiner, D.C., W.F.Laudenslayer, Jr., K.E. Mayer, and M. White, eds. 1988-1990. California's Wildlife. Vol. I-III. California Department of Fish and Game, Sacramento, California. Updates are noted in accounts that have been added or edited since original publication.