

Clapper Rails

By Bob Garrison

California is a state of superlatives; tallest mountain and lowest basin in the lower 48 states, greatest number of native plants and animals, greatest diversity of habitats, and largest human population to name a few. Our state also has the greatest number of Federal and State listed threatened and endangered species; 288 plants and 140 animals. Human population growth and the subsequent demand for more natural resources, whether land or water, poses a direct and ongoing threat to California's rich and diverse wild plants and animals. While each threatened or endangered species has their own unique story, California's three endangered subspecies of clapper rail reflect the challenges facing every species.

Clapper rails have over 20 separate subspecies which are found on the east and west coast of North, Central and South America. California has three subspecies; **the California clapper rail** found along the San Pablo and San Francisco Bays, **the light-footed clapper rail** found along the coast of southern and Baja California, and **the Yuma clapper rail** found along the lower Colorado River and the Salton Sea. The two coastal subspecies live in the cordgrass/pickleweed marshes along the shores of sheltered bays and estuaries. Since 1900, between 80 and 90 percent of California's salt marshes have been filled for development or diked and drained for agriculture and salt production. The Yuma clapper rail faces similar habitat loss as Colorado River water was either diverted from the rich freshwater marshes of the lower river, or inundated by dams across the river.

Clapper rails are well suited to life in this harsh environment. The birds spend most of their time hidden in the thick marsh vegetation. They seldom fly, preferring to hide or run from predators. They are opportunistic feeders, but prefer crabs and crayfish. During nesting season, the male builds a domed nest of dried plant material that can float during extreme high tides. Both the male and female take turns incubating their six to eight eggs. Heavy spring storms coupled with high tides often destroy up to half of the clapper rail nests found in the marsh. However, the resilient clapper rails will re-nest up to five times if their first attempts fail.

While clapper rails are well adapted to rebound from catastrophic population drops, today's limited habitat forces birds to use less than ideal nesting sites which increases the threat of nest failures. In addition, the recent introduction of non-native predators such as Norway rats, red foxes, and domestic dogs and cats have had a terrible toll on nesting clapper rails. As an example, the California clapper rail population plummeted from a mid-1970s population of 4,000-6,000 to only 300 in 1996. Extensive trapping around the San Francisco Bay in 1993 led to a doubling of the clapper rail population the following year. While the three subspecies of clapper rail found in California face many threats, they do have a chance of recovery. But only if we continue to protect and restore coastal

saltmarsh and Colorado River marsh habitat, and maintain non-native predator controls for this unique and imperiled ground-nesting bird.

Where to Watch Clapper Rails

Clapper rails are some of the most difficult birds to view. They are secretive and live in areas that are hard to reach. Their low numbers only add to the difficulty of viewing this bird.

Remember, responsible viewing means the needs of the wildlife come first. Especially when you are trying to view an endangered species. Never venture into the marsh to find clapper rails. Predators in search of nests will later use the trails you create. The sites listed below either have boardwalks or adjoining uplands where you can view the birds without destroying habitat. Do not use taped birdcalls to attract the birds and if the birds react to your presence, you are too close. Back away and use your binoculars or a spotting scope to view these allusive and wary birds.

California Clapper Rail

- Grizzly Island Wildlife Area (Suisun City)
- Palo Alto Baylands Preserve (Palo Alto)
- San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge (Fremont)

Light-footed Clapper Rail

- Upper Newport Bay Ecological Reserve (Newport Beach)
- Sweetwater Marsh National Wildlife Refuge (Chula Vista)
- Tijuana Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve (Imperial Beach)

Yuma Clapper Rail

- Picacho State Recreation Area (Yuma on Colorado River)
- Imperial Wildlife Area (Niland on Salton Sea)

(nearest city or town)

You can purchase a *California Wildlife Viewing Guide* which provides detailed wildlife viewing information and directions to these and over 190 other wildlife viewing sites by visiting www.CAWatchableWildlife.org.

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