Shorter Contributions

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A PROBABLE NEARSHORE RECORD OF KILLER WHALE (*ORCINUS ORCA*) ON ASSATEAGUE ISLAND, VIRGINIA. — Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*) are found worldwide in oceans but are uncommon in the western North Atlantic south of Nova Scotia (Katona et al., 1988; Mitchell & Reeves, 1988; Reeves & Mitchell, 1988a, b; Hairr, 2012). There are no stranding records in Virginia (Blaylock, 1985; Potter, 1991) and only two sight records in Virginia waters: (1) at the edge of the continental shelf (36° 46′ N, 74° 38′ W) approximately 118 km east of Virginia Beach (Katona et al., 1988); and (2) about 35 km east of Rudee Inlet, Virginia Beach (Koonce, 2002). Here I report a probable nearshore sighting of Killer Whales from Assateague Island, Accomack County, Virginia.

On the morning of 25 November 2007, I saw a pod of cetaceans (as many as seven individuals) from the beach on Assateague Island (37° 53.05′ N; 75° 20.66′ W). Distance was difficult to judge, but I estimated the pod was 400-600 m offshore. Observation with binoculars revealed that the dorsal fins were significantly taller than those of Atlantic Bottlenose Dolphins (*Tursiops truncatus*), the most frequently observed cetacean in the coastal waters of Virginia (Blaylock, 1985). I attempted several digital photographs with a Canon PowerShot A570 camera through a spotting scope set at 20X (Swarovski HD-ATS 65), but only one photograph captured the breaching whales (Fig. 1). The image showed two cetaceans, a submerged individual with a triangular dorsal fin (upper panel of Fig. 1) and a second breaching individual with curved dorsal fin (upper and lower panel of Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Killer Whales (*Orcinus orca*) photographed from the shore of Assateague Island, Virginia, on 25 November 2007.

I sent the photographs to James G. Mead and Charles W. Potter, cetacean specialists at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution. Both concluded that the cetaceans were most likely Killer Whales, representing a male (triangular fin) and female (curved fin). I then sent the photograph to an *Orca* specialist, Robert L. Pitman (Southwest Fisheries Research Center, NOAA Fisheries Service, La Jolla, CA), who replied (pers. comm.), "I think the dorsal fin of the lead animal looks awfully heavy for a *Grampus* [= *G. griseus*, Risso's Dolphin], and the fin of the back animal is suspiciously triangular. Also, the animals are quite black and the lead animal has what appears to be a rounded melon - I think if it was *Grampus* you could see the flatter front or even the cleft in the anterior portion of the melon. And I also agree, there could be an eye patch in there, either obscured by a bow wave or under water. I think they could be killer whales." On the basis of the photographic evidence, the Killer Whale should be placed on the provisional list of marine mammals recorded in coastal Virginia waters.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF A BLACK RAIL (*LATERALLUS JAMAICENSIS*) TERRITORY IN HUNTLEY MEADOWS, FAIRFAX COUNTY, VIRGINIA.—The Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*) is a rare breeding species in brackish and salt marshes in the Chesapeake Bay watershed (Robbins & Blom, 1997; Rottenborn & Brinkley, 2007). Occasional inland reports (May-July) suggest sporadic breeding in freshwater marshes although nesting has yet to be documented. The most celebrated Virginia record in recent memory occurred during the summer of 2002, when Kurt Gaskill discovered a singing male on 10 June in the non-tidal freshwater wetlands of Huntley Meadows County Park (HMCP), Fairfax County (Iliff, 2002; Rottenborn & Brinkley, 2007). Observation notebooks archived at HMCP indicate that the rail was reported on at least 21 days from 11 June through 13 July 2002. Although this was the first record of Black Rail in Fairfax County and among only a handful of inland records for Virginia during the past 50 years (Rottenborn & Brinkley, 2007), no documentation was submitted because the Avian Records Committee of the Virginia Society of Ornithology did not require documentation for this species at the time from Coastal Plain localities. The purpose of this note is to present a brief description of the habitat frequented by the rail and notes on its behavior.

I mapped the rail's territory on seven days, 22 June to 4 July, by tracking its vocalizations from the elevated boardwalk that winds across the floodplain of Barnyard Run with a global positioning system (GPS) receiver. The rail frequented a roughly circular area of marsh (ca. 0.47 ha) centered inside the boardwalk loop (38°45.24′ N, 77°6.28′ W). The areas of greatest singing frequency were dominated by thick monocultures of lizard's-tail (*Saururus cernuus*) and scattered patches of cattail (*Typha latifolia*) growing on mud or in shallow water (<5 cm) pooled behind a meandering series of low beaver dams (Fig. 1). Approximately 10% of the territory was covered by pools of open water or exposed mud. The water level in the territory was relatively stable, varying by no more than a few centimeters, during the observation period.

Fig. 1. Stands of lizard's-tail (foreground) and cattail frequented by a Black Rail in Huntley Meadows County Park, Fairfax County, Virginia, from 10 June to 13 July 2002.

I recorded the rail's vocalizations with a Marantz PMD430 cassette recorder and a Sennheiser ME 80 directional microphone (Fig. 2). The rail delivered the "*keekee-doo*" song and shorter "*kee-doo*" variants intermittently from dawn (0515 h) until dusk (1945 h). Both song variants are believed to be given by males (Eddleman et al., 1994). Singing bouts typically lasted

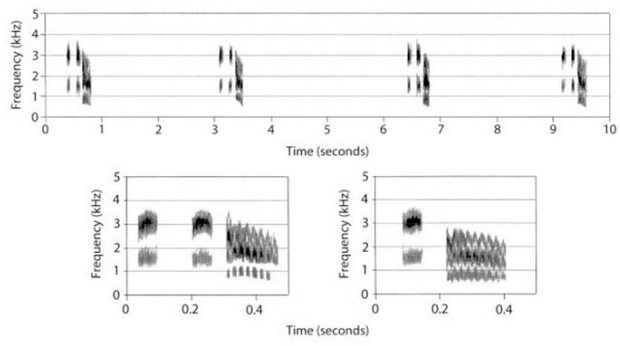

Fig. 2. Audio spectrograms of Black Rail songs recorded at Huntley Meadows County Park, Fairfax County, Virginia, on 3 July 2002. Upper panel shows the temporal spacing of "*keekee-doo*"songs during a typical singing bout. Spectrographic detail of the first song in the series is shown in the lower left panel. An example of the "*kee-doo*" song variant is shown in the lower right panel.