YELLOW-BREASTED RAIL.

+ORTYGOMETRA NOVEBORACENSIS, *Lath.*

PLATE CCCVII.—MALE.

The Prince of MUSIGNANO, who purchased one of these birds in the New York market in February, 1826, gave a figure of it, and considered it as an arctic species. This opinion, however, is incorrect, for the Yellow-breasted Rail is a constant resident in the Peninsula of the Floridas, as well as in the lower parts of Louisiana, where I have found it at all seasons. That a few straggling individuals should proceed northwards, advancing even to pretty high latitudes, is not much to be wondered at, as we have a similar case in the Common Gallinule. But at the season mentioned the individual referred to must have been forced thither by a storm, as no Rails of any kind are found in that part of the country in winter.

In the neighbourhood of New Orleans, this species is found in all the deserted savannahs, covered with thick long grass, and pools of shallow water. There you hear its sharp and curious notes many times in the course of the day, just as you hear those of *Rallus crepitans* near the sea-shore, more especially after the report of a gun, when they are louder and more quickly repeated. These sounds come on the ear so as to induce you to believe that the bird is near; but whether this be the case or not is not easily determined, for when you move towards a spot in which you suppose it to be, the sounds recede at your approach, and you may think yourself fortunate if, after half an hour of search, you discover one on wing. Indeed, if we have a bird in America approaching in its habits the Corn Crake of Europe, it is the Yellow-breasted Rail: it also resembles in its habits the European Quail, a bird as fond at times of damp meadows bordering rivers as this species is wont to be, when it seeks for a place of safety in which to form its nest and rear its young.

In the Floridas, this bird is more abundant than even in Louisiana; and I met with it frequently in the course of my wanderings there, not only on the mainland, but also on several of the keys, where they begin breeding in March. On Sandy Island, near Cape Sable, I found several pairs, in May 1832. About New Orleans it commences breeding at the same period. Dr. BACHMAN has procured specimens near Charleston. I have also found a few

Drawn from Nature by J. Audubon, F.R.S.E.L.S.

Yellow-breasted Chat.
Adult Male in Spring

Engraved & Col'd by J. T. Bowen, Phil.

near Vincennes, on the Wabash river, in summer, when they had young broods. In the course of my stay at the Silver Springs in East Florida, I observed a good number of these birds along the margins of the lakes and swampy bayous, and had ample opportunities of assuring myself that this species is far from being nocturnal, as authors have alleged, at least when in places where they are under no apprehension of danger. In those sultry solitudes I have at times seen them following the margins of the muddy shores, with delicate and measured steps, until attracted by something worthy of their attention, when they suddenly jerked their tail upwards and for a moment disappeared. Again, they would gracefully leap upon the slender twig of some low shrub or bush, apparently in search of small snails or other objects, jerking their tail at every movement. There it was that I again saw the extraordinary power of contraction which their body is able to assume while they are pushing forward between two or more stubborn branches. They were all so gentle that I at times approached within a few yards of them, when they would now and then look cunningly at me, rise more erect for a moment, and then resume their occupations.

When searched for by a dog, they seem as if determined to put him out by continual manœuvring, running and cutting backwards within a few yards of extent until the dog can no longer follow the last trail. Just then they rise on wing, or run off to some other spot equally adapted for security. A friend of mine who resides in New Orleans, and has shot some hundreds of this species, told me that the best method of obtaining a shot is to lie concealed near an opening in the grass, and call the bird out of cover by imitating its notes, when in a few minutes, being extremely pugnacious, it comes to the clear space, and may be easily shot. Its flesh is delicate and savoury.

The nest somewhat resembles that of *Rallus elegans*. It is generally placed upon the ground in the centre of a thick tuft of grass, and the bed of it is at times elevated above the soil to the height of four or five inches. It is composed of weeds of various kinds, and is now and then covered over in the same manner as that of our Meadow Lark. The eggs are from eight to ten, pure white, thin-shelled, and measure $1\frac{1}{8}$ inches by nearly seven-eighths. The young are at first black, and are able to follow their parents almost immediately after birth. I am induced to believe that two, or perhaps three, broods are reared in the season.

The flight of this pretty little bird is rather swift, and more protracted than that of some of our Rails, especially when put up by a dog coming inadvertently upon it. At other times, when in places not frequented, it rises and removes to a distance rarely exceeding thirty or forty yards, falling as it were among the grass with wings stretched upwards and dangling legs. The gizzard is large and muscular, as in the Water-hen and our other Rails. One

which I opened was filled with minute fresh-water shell-fish and gravel. They feed also on insects of various kinds, and the seeds of grasses.

My friend THOMAS NUTTALL has so well described the notes of this bird, that I cannot do better than present you with his account of them. "On the 6th of October, 1831, having spent the night in a lodge, on the borders of Fresh Pond, employed for decoying and shooting Ducks, I heard, about sunrise, the Yellow-breasted Rails begin to stir among the reeds (*Arundo Phragmites*) that thickly skirt this retired border of the lake, and in which, among a host of various kinds of Blackbirds, they had for sometime roosted every night. As soon as awake, they called out in an abrupt and cackling cry, 'krèk, 'krèk, 'krèk, 'krèk, 'kuk' k'kh, which note, apparently from the young, was answered by the parent (probably the hen) in a lower soothing note. The whole of these uncouth and guttural notes have no bad resemblance to the croaking of the tree frog, as to sound. This call and answer, uttered every morning, is thus kept up for several minutes in various tones, till the whole family, separated for the night, have met and satisfactorily recognised each other."

I once shot a female bird of this species near New Orleans upon which I had nearly trodden as she was on the nest and about to lay an egg, and which she dropped as she flew before me, previously to my touching the trigger. In August and September I have found this species uncommonly fat, and most delicious. The difficulty of procuring them, however, renders them a rarity for the table even in those parts of the country where they are most abundant.

I have no doubt that a few stragglers now and then go far north to breed, as I find in the Fauna Boreali-Americana the following note from Mr. HUTCHINS's manuscripts:—"This elegant bird is an inhabitant of the marshes (on the coast of Hudson's Bay, near the efflux of Severn river, where Mr. HUTCHINS resided) from the middle of May to the end of September. It never flies above sixty yards at a time, but runs with great rapidity among the long grass near the shores. In the morning and evening it utters a note, which resembles the striking of a flint and steel; at other times it makes a shrieking noise. It builds no nest, but lays from ten to sixteen perfectly white eggs among the grass."

Now, this making no nest is to me a convincing proof that the species is not there in its natural place, but finding itself pushed for time, and yet obliged to breed, is contented to do so under unfavourable circumstances. Dr. RICHARDSON, who spent several years in the northern parts of America, did not meet with this species. I saw none in Labrador or Newfoundland; and in the British provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, the only bird of this family known is the Sora, *Ortygometra carolinus*.

Dr. TRUDEAU has favoured me with the following notice respecting this species:—"The Yellow-breasted Rail winters in the Southern States of the Union. It arrives in Louisiana in company with *Rallus (Ortygometra) jamaicensis*, about the end of October or the beginning of November. As well as that species it is very common in the marshes in the vicinity of the woods. It is a very difficult thing to force either of these two Rails to take flight; for if chased by a dog, they will only fly when the animal is near catching them. However, it is much easier to kill them at this season of the year than in the spring, in the Northern States. It is there I can say almost impossible to put them up. The reason of this is probably their attachment to their eggs or young ones. Some of them nestle in Louisiana. About the beginning of March, these two species begin to migrate northward. They are to be seen at Salem, in New Jersey, by the end of April. A few of the Yellow-breasts remain there, and a great number of the other species breed. I suppose that many proceed as far as Hudson's Bay."

RALLUS NOVEBORACENSIS, Bonap. Syn., p. 335.

RALLUS NOVEBORACENSIS, Bonap. Amer. Orn., vol. iv. p. 136.

YELLOW-BREASTED RAIL, *Rallus noveboracensis*, Swains. and Rich. F. Bor. Amer., vol. ii. p. 402.

YELLOW-BREASTED RAIL, Nutt. Man., vol. ii. p. 402.

YELLOW-BREASTED RAIL, *Rallus noveboracensis*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. iv. p. 251; vol. v. p. 574.

Male, $7\frac{3}{4}$, $12\frac{1}{4}$.

Common in Lower Louisiana and Florida, where it breeds. Stragglers go as far as Hudson's Bay. Occasionally met with far in the interior. Prefers fresh water.

Adult Male.

Bill shorter than the head, rather stout, compressed, tapering. Upper mandible with the dorsal line nearly straight, being slightly convex towards the end, the ridge narrow and convex in its whole length, the sides convex towards the end, the edges sharp, slightly overlapping, destitute of notch. Nasal groove broad, and extending to a little beyond the middle of the bill; nostrils linear, lateral, submedial, pervious. Lower mandible with the angle long and narrow, the sides erect, the dorsal line sloping upwards, the edges a little inflected, the tip narrowed, the gap-line straight.

Head rather small, oblong, compressed. Neck shortish. Body compact, deeper than broad. Feet of moderate length, rather stout; tibia bare a short way above the joint; tarsus of ordinary length, compressed, anteriorly covered with broad scutella, posteriorly with smaller, and on the sides reticulated. Hind toe small and very slender; middle toe longest, and

longer than the tarsus; inner toe considerably shorter than the outer; toes free, with numerous scutella above. Claws much compressed, slightly arched, tapering to a fine point, flat and marginate beneath.

Plumage rather stiff, but soft, blended, and slightly glossed above. Feathers of the forehead somewhat bristly, broad and rounded; of the hind parts elongated. Wings short, broad, concave; alula large, primaries curved, broad, abruptly rounded, the second longest, third scarcely shorter, first equal to seventh; secondaries broad and rounded, the inner elongated, some of them extending a quarter of an inch beyond the longest primary. Tail extremely short, much rounded, of *ten* feeble rounded feathers; the upper and lower tail-coverts as long as the tail-feathers.

Bill greenish-black, with the base dull yellowish-orange. Iris hazel. Feet and claws light flesh-colour. Upper part of the head and hind neck blackish-brown, the feathers slightly edged with dull light brownish-red, those on the occiput and hind neck with a small white spot on the outer edge. The upper parts are brownish-black, longitudinally streaked with brownish-yellow, each feather being broadly margined with the latter, and crossed with from one to three narrow white bars. Alula greyish-brown, each feather with a white dot near the tip; primaries similar, the outer four unspotted; the edge of the wing, and the basal half of the outer web of the first primary yellowish-white; outer secondaries greyish-brown, white towards the end, three of them having that colour extending over more than half of their length; inner secondaries like the back, as are the tail-feathers. Loral space and a line beyond the eye blackish-brown. Sides of the head, neck, and anterior part of the body light brownish-red, each feather terminally margined with deep brown; sides like the back; axillaries, lower wing-coverts, and middle of the abdomen, pure white; sides of the rump like the back; lower tail-coverts brownish-red, with faint whitish dots.

Length to end of tail $7\frac{3}{4}$ inches, to end of claws $9\frac{3}{4}$, to end of wings 7; extent of wings $12\frac{1}{4}$; wing from flexure $3\frac{9}{12}$; tail $1\frac{4}{12}$; tarsus $\frac{11}{12}$; first toe and claw $\frac{5}{12}$; second toe $\frac{10}{12}$, its claw $\frac{3}{12}$; third toe $1\frac{1}{12}$, its claw $\frac{3\frac{1}{2}}{12}$; fourth toe $\frac{10\frac{1}{2}}{12}$, its claw $\frac{2\frac{1}{2}}{12}$. Weight $2\frac{3}{4}$ oz.

The female is smaller than the male, but similar in colour.

Length to end of tail $6\frac{3}{4}$ inches, to end of claws $8\frac{3}{4}$; extent of wings 11. Weight 2 oz.

Drawn from Nature by J. Audubon. FRS. E. 7. 5

*Yellow-breasted Chat.
Adult Male in Spring*

Engraved & Col'd by J. T. Bowen, Phil.

Audubon, John James. 1842. "Yellow-Breasted Rail, *Orthygometra noveboracensis*, Lath. [Pl. 307]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 5, 152–156.

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