

## THE VIRGINIAN RAIL.

+*RALLUS VIRGINIANUS*, Linn.

PLATE CCCXI.—MALE, FEMALE, AND YOUNG.

This species, which, although smaller, bears a great resemblance to the Great Red-breasted Rail or Fresh-water Marsh-hen, is met with in most parts of the United States at different seasons. Many spend the winter within our southern limits, and I have found them at that time in Lower Louisiana, the Floridas, Georgia, and the Carolinas. In the western country some have been known to remain until severe frost came on, and there they usually stay to a much later period than in our Middle Districts, from which they generally retire southward in the beginning of October. During spring and summer, I observed some in different places from the shores of the Wabash river in Illinois, to those of the St. John's in the British province of New Brunswick. In the latter district, they were considered extremely rare birds by the inhabitants, some of whom brought me a few as great curiosities. Farther north, I neither saw nor heard of any; but on the borders of Lakes Erie and Michigan, they breed in considerable numbers, as well as near our maritime districts.

In its habits the *Rallus virginianus* is intermediate between the *R. crepitans* and *Ortygometra carolinus*: it obtains its food as well in salt-water marshes as in fresh meadows, watery savannahs, and the borders of ponds and rivers. The latter situations, however, seem to suit it best during summer; but whenever both kinds of places are combined, or near each other, there you are sure to meet with it.

The time of breeding varies according to the latitude of the place. I have found the female sitting on her eggs in the beginning of March, a few miles from New Orleans; in Kentucky, near Henderson, in April; about a fortnight later near Vincennes, in Illinois; and from the 10th of May to the middle of June, in the Middle and Eastern States. The males usually arrive at the breeding-places a week or ten days before the females. They travel silently and by night, as I have ascertained by observing them proceed singly and in a direct course, at a height of only a few feet, over our broad rivers, or over level land, when their speed is such as is never manifested by them under ordinary circumstances. Their movements can be easily traced for fifty yards or so during nights of brilliant moonshine, when you





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*Argemone* *Paul.*  
 1 Male. 2 Female. 3 Young







see them passing with a constant beat of the wings, in the manner of a Green-winged Teal. As soon as they arrive at their destination, they may be heard emitting their cries about sunset, occasionally through the night, and again with increased vigour at the dawn of day, as if expressing their impatience for the arrival of their companions. The love-notes of this species have some resemblance to those of the Clapper Rail, but now and then are changed for others something like *crek, crek, creek, or creek, creek, creek*. Being expert ventriloquists, like their congeners, they sometimes seem to be far off, when in fact they are within a few yards of you. One morning I had the good fortune to witness their amatory gestures, which I will here try to describe, that you may in some degree participate in the amusement which the scene afforded me.

The sun had scarcely begun to send his horizontal rays over the lake, on the margin of which I stood, revolving in my mind the many enjoyments which the Author of nature has benignantly accorded to his creatures. The air was clear and serene, and the waters spread before me without a ruffle on their surface. The notes of the Rail came loudly on my ear, and on moving towards the spot whence they proceeded, I observed the bird exhibiting the full ardour of his passion. Now with open wings raised over its body, it ran around its beloved, opening and flirting its tail with singular speed. Each time it passed before her, it would pause for a moment, raise itself to the full stretch of its body and legs, and bow to her with all the grace of a well-bred suitor of our own species. The female also bowed in recognition, and at last, as the male came nearer and nearer in his circuits, yielded to his wishes, on which the pair flew off in the manner of house-pigeons, sailing and balancing their bodies on open wings until out of sight. During this exhibition, the male emitted a mellow note, resembling the syllables *cuckoe, cuckoe*, to which the female responded with the kind of lisping sound uttered by young birds of the species when newly hatched.

Excepting our Little Partridge, I know no small bird so swift of foot as the Virginian Rail. In fact, I doubt if it would be an easy matter for an active man to outstrip one of them on plain ground; and to trust to one's speed for raising one among the thick herbage to which they usually resort, would certainly prove fallacious. There they run to a short distance, then tack about, and again scud away in a lateral direction, so as to elude the best dog, or if likely to be overtaken, rise on wing, fly with dangling legs eight or ten yards, drop among the weeds, and run off as swiftly as before. Notwithstanding all this, I managed to secure a good number of them by means of a partridge net, setting the wings of that apparatus at very obtuse angles, and calling them by imitating the lisping notes of the female from some distance beyond the bag of the net. Now and then I found them too



cunning for me, as, on discovering that the wings of the net were in their way, they would get over it in the same manner as that in which a sailor mounts the shrouds of a ship. Our Common Coot uses the same artifice.

The nest of the Virginian Rail is not easily found after incubation has commenced, for then the male, contrary to the habits of most birds, becomes comparatively silent, and the female quite mute. At such times I have once or twice almost trodden on one, which I should never have discovered, had not the poor bird fluttered off in despair, employing all the artifices used by other species on such occasions. It is placed on a small elevation formed by the accumulation of the stalks of a large bunch of grasses, in the centre of which some dry weeds are arranged to the height of two or three inches, with a very shallow cavity. The eggs are four or five, seldom more than six or seven, and resemble in colour those of the *Rallus crepitans*, although smaller, measuring an inch and a quarter in length, by eleven-twelfths in breadth, and being rather more rounded. The young are covered with a jet black down, and run after their mother as soon as they make their escape from the egg;—at least I suppose this to be the case, on account of my having caught some that seemed newly hatched. The mother leads them with the greatest care among the long grass of the damp meadows, or the weeds growing near the ponds, to which they resort at all times, and particularly near the margins of pools or muddy streams, into which they run and disperse on the least appearance of danger. When no water is near, the little ones squat in silence, and await the call of their parent, to which all at once answer, when they quickly collect once more around her.

This species is able to cling to, and climb along the blades of tall grasses, even under water, when in danger, and is equally able to swim gracefully to a considerable distance, as to alight on low bushes, in which situation I have shot a few of them. When amid the broad leaves of water-lilies, they walk and run on them with as much ease as the Gallinules. When pursued, the Virginian Rail is, with great difficulty, put up, as I have already mentioned, but when it is once on wing it may be shot by a very ordinary gunner. It rises without noise, flies off with its legs dangling and its neck stretched out, but seldom proceeds farther than twenty or thirty yards at a time, unless when it has a stream to cross, or during its migrations. Like all the other species with which I am acquainted, it feeds both by day and by night. Its food consists of small slugs, snails, aquatic insects, worms, crustacea, and the seeds of those grasses which grow in salt or fresh water marshes, in either of which they reside and even breed. I have not been able to ascertain whether they lay more than once in the season; but, on account of the comparatively small number of this species, I am inclined to suppose that they



seldom raise more than one brood, unless their eggs have been destroyed, whether by inundation or otherwise.

The Virginian Rail is not without enemies; and, although it manifests a good deal of courage, and at times acts towards the Marsh Hawk in the same manner as the *Rallus crepitans*, it seldom succeeds in its attempts, and on several occasions I have seen that bird seize them as they attempted to strike it with their bill and claws for the purpose of driving it away. The minx, the garfish, the snapping-turtle, and sometimes eels, destroy them, as well as the Sora Rail.

Whilst at Charleston, in South Carolina, I frequently saw little strings of these birds exposed in the market, at a very low price; and they are excellent eating during autumn and winter. Their comparative scarcity, however, prevents the gunner from searching after them with the same eagerness as he pursues the *Rallus crepitans*, and to shoot a dozen in the course of a day may be considered a remarkable feat. In that country, during the latter part of autumn, and in winter, they are usually met with in the salt-marshes bordering the estuaries of large rivers.

Like the two preceding species, the Virginian Rail has the power of contracting its body to enable it to pass with more ease between the stalks of strong grasses or other plants. When observed unseen, it frequently jerks the tail upwards, in the manner of Gallinules, but the moment it notices any one of its enemies, it droops the tail, lowers its head, and runs off with the quickness of thought.

The young of this species are at first of a black colour, like that of *Rallus crepitans* and *R. elegans*; but, like those of the latter, attain the rufous hue of the parent birds before the commencement of winter, although they increase in size and improve in the depth of their tints probably for several years.

VIRGINIAN RAIL, *Rallus virginianus*, Wils. Amer. Orn., vol. vii. p. 109.

RALLUS VIRGINIANUS, Bonap. Syn., p. 334.

LESSER CLAPPER RAIL, Nutt. Man., vol. ii. p. 205.

VIRGINIAN RAIL, *Rallus virginianus*, Aud. Orn. Biog., vol. iii. p. 41; vol. v. p. 573.

Male, 10½, 14¼. Female, 9¼.

Distributed through the country, and along the Atlantic shores, from Texas to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia; breeding in all the districts. Frequents fresh and salt water. Returns southward in autumn, when great numbers spend the winter from Carolina to Louisiana.

Adult Male.

Bill longer than the head, slender, compressed, slightly curved, deep at



the base. Upper mandible with the dorsal line slightly curved, the ridge flattish at the base, and extending a little on the forehead, convex and narrow towards the end; a deep groove runs on either side parallel to the ridge for two-thirds of the whole length; the edges inflected, with a very slight notch close to the tip. Nostrils lateral, linear, direct, open and pervious. Lower mandible with the angle very long, extremely narrow, the sides erect, slightly convex, the edges inflected, the tip narrowed, the dorsal and marginal outlines slightly arched.

Head rather small, oblong, compressed. Neck rather long. Body slender, much compressed. Feet rather long; tibia bare a considerable way above the joint; tarsus of ordinary length, compressed, anteriorly covered with broad scutella, posteriorly with smaller, and on the sides reticulated. Hind toe very small and slender, middle toe longest, fourth considerably shorter, and but little longer than the second; toes free, scutellate above, compressed, granulate beneath. Claws of moderate length, arched, slender, much compressed, acute, flat and marginate beneath.

Plumage rather stiff, compact, slightly glossed on the back. Feathers of the head and neck short and blended; of the forehead with the shaft enlarged and extended beyond the tip. Wings very short and broad; alula large; primaries curved, broad, tapering, but obtuse, third longest, second very little shorter, first and sixth about equal; secondaries broad and rounded. Tail extremely short, much rounded, of twelve feeble rounded feathers; the upper and lower tail-coverts nearly as long as the tail-feathers.

Bill dark brown, the lower mandible and edges of upper yellowish-brown. Iris bright red. Feet yellowish-brown, tinged with olive; claws more dusky. The general colour of the upper parts is deep brownish-black, with streaks of light olive-brown; sides of the head dull bluish-grey, loreal space of a deeper tint; a brownish-orange line over the eye. Alula, primary quills, and tail, blackish-brown; secondary quills like the back, but edged with greenish-brown, smaller coverts dark chestnut. Throat reddish-white; fore neck and breast bright orange-brown, approaching to yellowish-red; sides, abdomen, and lower wing-coverts barred with brownish-black and white, the bands of the latter narrower; tibial feathers dusky anteriorly, light reddish behind. Lower tail-coverts each with a central brownish-black spot, the edges white, the tips pale reddish.

Length to end of tail  $10\frac{1}{2}$  inches, to end of claws 13, extent of wings  $14\frac{1}{4}$ ; bill  $1\frac{7}{12}$ ; tarsus  $1\frac{5}{12}$ , middle toe and claw  $1\frac{9}{12}$ ; wing from flexure  $4\frac{1}{2}$ , tail  $1\frac{1}{12}$ .

#### Adult Female.

The female is considerably smaller than the male, but resembles it in colouring, only the dark tints of the upper parts are lighter, the chestnut of the wings paler, and the lower parts of a less bright red.



Length  $9\frac{1}{4}$ .

Young bird fledged.

When fully fledged the young does not differ materially in colour from the old, the tints being merely somewhat duller.

In colouring, this species is so nearly allied to *R. elegans*, that the description of the one might pass very well for that of the other; the principal difference being that the sides of the head are grey in the former, and dusky in the latter. Of course, the difference in size and habits is sufficient to prevent their being confounded together.

In an adult male, the width of the mouth is only 3 twelfths; on the palate are two papillate ridges, then anteriorly a single series of strong reversed papillæ, and towards the end a median ridge. The tongue is 1 inch 2 twelfths in length, very slender, broadly channelled above in its whole length, horny beneath, the tip narrow, thin-edged, and slightly slit. The œsophagus is 3 inches 10 twelfths long, 3 twelfths in width; the proventriculus ovate,  $3\frac{1}{2}$  twelfths in breadth. The stomach is of moderate size, 10 twelfths long, 11 twelfths broad; its lateral muscles very large, as are the tendons, the lower muscle prominent; the epithelium dense, bright red, with numerous longitudinal rugæ, being thus less adapted for grinding than that of the Sora Rail. The contents are numerous fragments of small shells, and remains of insects. The lobes of the liver are very unequal, the left 1 inch, the right  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches in length. The intestine is 18 inches long, its average width  $2\frac{1}{2}$  twelfths; the cœca 1 inch 7 twelfths long,  $2\frac{1}{2}$  twelfths in width, rounded at the end, 1 inch 10 twelfths from the extremity; the cloaca globular, 10 twelfths in diameter.

The trachea is 3 inches long, much flattened, from  $1\frac{1}{2}$  twelfths to 1 twelfth in breadth; the rings feeble, divided as in the Sora Rail, and 120 in number; bronchi moderate, of 15 half rings.

This species also I found in Texas, and from thence to the mouths of the Mississippi.





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*Virginian Bird.*  
 1 Male. 2 Female. 3 Young





Audubon, John James. 1842. "The Virginian Rail, *Rallus virginianus*, Linn. [Pl. 311]." *The birds of America : from drawings made in the United States and their territories* 5, 174–179. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.319425>.

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