RALLUS AQUATICUS, Linn.

Walter & Cohen, Prop.

Stouck and H. Procter del. & lith.

RALLUS AQUATICUS, Linn.

Water-Rail.

Rallus aquaticus, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 262.

It is no easy task to write a life-like description of the Water-Rail, its habits, and economy. We know that it is a shy, stealthy, active, running creature, in actions as much like a rat as a bird, and that it frequents the sedge-covered sides of our rivers, pools, and water-courses, particularly where tussocky grasses abound and afford shelter for many other things beside this little dark-coloured bird, which threads the herbage with facility, and bounds like a ball before the nose of the Spaniel. This lath-like bird, which flies only to avoid danger, or swims across the pool for a similar purpose, delights in a state of seclusion, and dwells all the year round in low situations among tangled herbage, much after the manner of the Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*), to which it most closely assimilates in its mode of life and economy; but shy as that bird may be, the Water-Rail is still more so, and hence it is very seldom seen or heard. Its distribution over the British Islands is so general that it is found everywhere, from the Land's End to the Islands of Orkney and Shetland and the outermost Hebrides. It is equally numerous in every part of Europe, Africa from north to south, India from the Himalayas throughout the peninsula, China, and Japan; yet widely as the bird is distributed, how seldom is it seen, and how few are the persons who have had a close view of it! We know that it builds a slight nest of leaves and strips of flags, in a tuft of grass near the edge of the stream, lake, or pond, and that it lays eight or nine eggs, from which in due time emerge a like number of small black-downy nestlings; these tiny creatures scramble about the herbage in the innermost recesses of the pool, and accompany their parents over the floating leaves of the *Nymphææ* and other aquatic flowers, hunting with the utmost activity, from the minute they are born, for the flies and other insects constituting their food. If, in the English waters, they escape the Pike, and in the African lagoon the equally destructive Tortoise, they soon change their black downy livery for feathers similar in character and colouring to those of their parents, both of which are alike in their dress.

Were the sportsman to go out with the express intention of shooting a Water-Rail, the chances are that eight out of ten times he would be disappointed; yet I have known several killed in a day during the great Pheasant-battues in the low copses and ditchy covers of Norfolk, Suffolk, and Lincolnshire: rarely, however, does it take wing, even before a string of beaters; should it do so, it is for the last time, for it flies straight and slowly, and it is therefore easily killed.

Unlike the Land-Rail, this bird is strictly indigenous in our islands, and consequently is to be found at all seasons; but great accessions to the usual numbers arrive during the autumn months from the north, at least this is the opinion of Mr. Stevenson of Norwich, who has favoured me with the following note respecting the bird as observed by him in Norfolk:—

“The Water-Rail is common throughout the year, and is found in all moist situations, but, of course, most plentifully amongst the reed-beds and sedgy margins of the broads, where it nests freely during the summer months. Yet, from the swampy nature of the localities, but few eggs are taken in any season. It has been doubtful whether this species remains in England during the winter; but supposing even that some portion of those bred in our marshes proceed further south during sharp weather, others undoubtedly still remain, and, like the common Waterhens, suffer very severely during sharp frosts. I have shot them, both on the broads and by the river-side, when the ground has been covered with snow, and only a small channel left unfrozen in the middle of the stream. Why these birds should remain with us at such times, to endure the privations of both hunger and cold, it is difficult to imagine, more particularly as flights from more northern localities, proving the migratory habits of the species, undoubtedly visit us during the autumn months. On more than one occasion, whilst Snipe-shooting at Surlingham, in October and November, I have found unusual numbers of these birds, and, after shooting two or three couple, have had the greatest difficulty in calling off the dog and persuading him to devote his attention exclusively to the Snipe. At such times I have always discovered the Rails scattered over the drier marshes surrounding the broad, and either winding their way between the tussocks of grass or hidden in the dense undergrowth of the willow and alder bushes, whilst the few that are met with at other times are generally flushed by the water's edge or from the sedges bordering a bed of reeds. I have never known them to remain in these numbers for two successive days; but like Woodcocks, resting after a long flight, they afford ample sport at the time, and are soon off again on their southward journey.

“As some proof of the number that thus visit us, I may add that on one occasion at Surlingham, in the

early part of October, a friend of mine bagged 10½ couple in one day to his own gun. A very curious and most unusual pied variety of this bird was killed recently at Lingwood, in this county."

The following description of the nest of this species was published by Mr. John Smith, of Yarmouth, in the 'Annals of Natural History,' vol. ii. p. 78:—"The bird had selected for her nest a thick tuft of long grass, hollow at the bottom, on the side of the reed-pond; the nest, about an inch and a half thick, was composed of withered leaves and rushes; it was so covered by the top of the grass, that neither bird, nest, nor eggs could be seen; the entrance to and from the nest was through an aperture of the grass directly into the reeds opposite, where any one could stand to see the nest. The length of the eggs, on an average, were one inch and a half, some near a tenth more, others near a tenth less; weight seven drachms; colour light cream, thickly spotted at the larger ends with bright rusty red intermixed with sunk faint lilac spots, thinly and finely spotted at the lesser ends with the same colours, with a blush of pink over the whole egg, but more towards the lesser ends; the yolk a bright blood-red, brighter than that of any egg I ever opened; and I think that the pink tint of the shell is owing to the redness of the yolk, for after emptying the eggs it was hardly perceptible. On the 20th of June I found another nest in the same reed-pond, built among the reeds, and very near the water. On the 10th of July I obtained a third nest from the same place, of eleven eggs, within two or three days of hatching, the nest and situation much like the last."

I am indebted to Mr. H. Smither, of Churt, for the examples of the young figured in my Plate, and which he informs me were taken from the edge of Frencham ponds, the nest in which they were placed being in a sedgetolt, as they are there called, a tall mass of sedge, sometimes two or three feet high, surrounded with water.

When moving about in security in search of food, the Water-Rail often flirts up its tail, and exposes the large creamy-white under-coverts; it swims and dives with readiness, and occasionally runs over the surface of the water, supported by the floating herbage, for traversing which its widely expanding feet are well adapted. Worms, slugs, insects, shelled mollusks, and the leaves and seeds of certain aquatic plants are doubtless the principal articles of its diet; but that it partakes of many other things is certain. Mr. Bond informs me that a friend of his, who had some Water-Rails cooked Snipe-fashion (that is, with their trails in them), when they came to table, found a small Shrew-mouse in one of them. In this habit of feeding occasionally on small animals the Water-Rail assimilates to the Moorhen, which, on reference to my account of that species, will be found to live upon birds, animals, and many other objects it is not supposed to eat. A Water-Rail kept alive by Mr. Selby for some time was fed entirely upon earth-worms, upon which it continued to thrive until an accident deprived it of life; and that it will readily live in confinement is further proved by an example which has been in the Gardens of the Zoological Society for a considerable period.

Upper surface, secondaries nearest the body and tail olive brown, streaked with blackish brown down the middle of each feather; spurious wing, primaries, and outermost secondaries dusky olive-brown; chin greyish white; neck and breast dull greyish blue; abdomen and inner part of the thighs cream-coloured; larger wing-coverts and flanks barred with black and white; under tail-coverts creamy white, the smaller feathers barred with black; irides reddish brown; upper mandible olive, lower mandible and gape bright red; legs light reddish brown, toes somewhat darker.

The Plate represents a male and female, and a brood of young ones two or three days old, all of the natural size.

Gould, John. 1873. "Water-Rail, *Rallus aquaticus* [Pl. 86]." *The birds of Great Britain* 4, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324040>.

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