ARIZONA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT
HERITAGE DATA MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Animal Abstract **Element Code: ABNME03041**
Data Sensitivity: No

CLASSIFICATION, NOMENCLATURE, DESCRIPTION, RANGE

NAME: *Laterallus jamaicensis coturniculus*
COMMON NAME: California Black Rail, Pacific Black Rail, Little Black Rail, Farallon Rail, Farallon Black Crake.
SYNONYMS: *Porzana jamaiensis coturniculus*
FAMILY: *Rallidae*

AUTHOR, PLACE OF PUBLICATION: Ridgway, 1874. American Naturalist, 8. No.2. Feb 1874, p.111.

TYPE LOCALITY: The first record of this bird was of a single individual apparently collected on the Farron Islands, California in 1859, more than 20 miles from the closest marsh.

TYPE SPECIMEN:

TAXONOMIC UNIQUENESS: Two of the five sub-species of *Laterallus jamaicensis* breed in North America, and include *L. j. coturniculus* and *L. j. jamaicensis*.

DESCRIPTION: Smallest North American rail, sparrow-sized, total adult length 10 - 15 cm (3.94-5.91 in); mean mass 29g. Adult generally shades of pale to blackish gray. Top of head darker than surrounding plumage (more evident in females); bill short and black. Underparts from chin to abdomen uniformly colored but lighter on chin and throat. Undertail coverts and flanks streaked with white and dark gray, washed with chestnut. Nape and upper back chestnut. Remainder of dorsum-back, uppertail coverts, and remiges - shades of dark gray, sometimes washed with chestnut or brown with scattered white spots. Spotting extends to wing coverts and secondaries, although much individual variation in amount of spotting. Rectrices brownish gray. Irises of adult shades of bright red, differing from other North American rails. Tarsi and toes grayish brown. Sexually dimorphic in plumage, but sexes similar in size (Eddleman et al 1994). Juveniles similar to adult, but juvenile plumage duller and white spots on back and wings fewer and smaller, white streaks on flanks thinner and less distinct.

AIDS TO IDENTIFICATION: Easily distinguished from similar species in hand and at close range. In flight, might be confused with Yellow Rail *(Coturnicops noveboracensis)* or Sora *(Porzana carolina)*, both of which have short bills for rails, but substantially smaller and darker than both and lacks white wing patches of Yellow Rail (Eddleman et al 1994). California Black Rail is smaller (29g vs 35 g) and brighter colored than the Eastern Black Rail (*L. j. jamaicensis*).

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ILLUSTRATIONS: Color drawing (Robbins et al 1983 p. 105)
Color drawing (Peterson 1990 p. 119)
Color drawing (National Geographic 1999, Third Edition p.147)
Color photograph (Farrand 1988 p.127)
Color photograph (La Tourrette *in* http://elib.cs.berkeley.edu/cgi/img_query?enlarge=8235+3181+2553+0092)

TOTAL RANGE: The California Black Rail only occurs in coastal California, northwestern Baja California, the lower Imperial Valley, and the lower Colorado River in Arizona and California. Whereas its cousin, the Eastern Black Rail is at least partially migratory, wintering in the southern part of its breeding range, the California Black Rail is largely resident (Eddleman et al 1994). A statewide survey conducted in the 1970's suggested that the marshes of San Francisco Bay probably supported the bulk of the Black Rail population in California (Evens, *Unknown*)

RANGE WITHIN ARIZONA: Confined to the extreme southwest part of the state. Locally common in certain *scirpus* marshes along a short stretch of the Colorado River in Yuma Co., from Mittry Lake north to above Martinez Lake. Lower Colorado River populations not detected until 1969, and dynamic nature of wetlands before dam-building there may have precluded occurrence historically (Flores and Eddleman 1991). Others argue that present day populations on lower Colorado River and Salton Trough are relicts persisting from a time when marshes were more extensive (Evens et al 1991). Recently the California Black Rail has been recorded occurring as far north as the Bill Williams River delta.

SPECIES BIOLOGY AND POPULATION TRENDS

BIOLOGY: More often heard than seen the California Black Rail has a distinctive call chiefly heard in the breeding and at night: male gives a repeated *kik-kee -doo, kik-kik-groo* or *kik-kee-derr*; female *croo-croo-oa* or *whoo-whoo*. Unlike other rails, most vocal in the middle of the night, from one to two hours after sunset to one to two hours before sunrise (Johnson 1991). Because of its sporadic distribution and secretive habits, the Black Rail is of great interest to bird watchers, although much remains to be learned about its life history. Runs mouse-like through marsh vegetation. Flies weakly. Seldom seen except when flooded out of salt marshes by high winter tides.

REPRODUCTION: Little information exists regarding pre-nesting behavior, but if calling indicates approximate dates then pairing may occur in late February through July in the California Black Rail. The nest comprises a well woven or loose cup of soft grasses, with green grasses arched above, hiding it from above. Typically in or along the edge of marsh in grasses 18-24 inches in height. Usually completely hidden in thick clump of marsh grass or prickle-weed, and built on mat of dead grasses from previous year (Johnson 1991). A clutch of around 6-8 buff white to creamy white, finely dotted brown eggs are laid (between March and May in Arizona), and are incubated by both parents. The eggs hatch in 16-20 days and

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the young leave the nest soon after hatching, being cared for by both parents. Possibly two broods annually.

FOOD HABITS: Limited information available, but probably an opportunistic feeder taking small aquatic and terrestrial invertebrates along with the seeds of aquatic plants. Bill shape suggests generalized feeding methods such as gleaning or pecking at individual items, thus reliance on sight for finding food. Probably a daytime feeder; active throughout the day (Weske 1969). Individuals collected in San Diego Bay, CA, in 1912 had exclusively eaten isopod crustacean *Alloniscus mirabilis* (Huey 1916).

HABITAT: Chiefly, tidal salt marshes, where associated characteristically with heavy growths of pickle weed, (Salicornia). Also occurs in brackish and fresh-water marshes, all at low elevations. Most important hazards to existence on salt marshes appear to be extra high tides. Nests in high portions of salt marshes, shallow freshwater marshes, wet meadows, and flooded grassy vegetation. Uses sites with shallower water than other North American rails (Eddelman et al 1988). Most breeding areas vegetated by fine-stemmed emergent plants, rushes, grasses, or sedges (Todd 1977). Habitat of wintering Black Rails in Arizona differs little from breeding habitat. In Arizona, seems to occupy only narrow belts of shallow-water habitat along shorelines, where emergent and shore side vegetation mix, and when fallen vegetation form mats. Does not thrive where water levels fluctuate widely.

ELEVATION: Occurs from sea level in the coastal bays of northern California, to lower elevations along the Colorado River bordering California and Arizona. Lower Colorado River: 155-475 ft (47.3-145 m).

PLANT COMMUNITY:

POPULATION TRENDS: Again, little is known, but thought to be declining over much of its range. Massive loss of habitat associated with historic and ongoing pressure of agriculture, salt production, and urbanization has drastically reduced Black Rail populations in western U.S. In San Francisco Bay, 95% of tidal marshes present in 1850 had been diked or filled by 1979. Black Rail populations must have suffered concurrent declines and are now confined to most pristine remnants of historical tidal marshes (Evens et al. 1991). Available habitat is probably principal factor regulating populations (Todd 1977).

SPECIES PROTECTION AND CONSERVATION

ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT STATUS: None (USDI, FWS, 1996)
[C2 USDI, FWS, 1991]

STATE STATUS: WC (WSCA, AGFD in prep)

OTHER STATUS: Forest Service Sensitive (USDA, FS Region 3 1999)
Threatened Species, (CFG)

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MANAGEMENT FACTORS: Not included in list of game species since 1967 and probably rarely taken by hunters before then. Most management factors limited to reviews of population status and compilations of existing information.

PROTECTIVE MEASURES TAKEN: Benefits from programs to preserve and enhance wetlands; such programs should be encouraged for conservation of Black Rails. Active surveys in both Arizona and California to determine population status.

SUGGESTED PROJECTS: Any recovery plan should include determining effects of development, land-use practices, and wetland modification on Black Rail habitat; and determining more details on basic biology, especially population parameters and ecology during winter.

LAND MANAGEMENT/OWNERSHIP: BLM, FWS, AGFD.

SOURCES OF FURTHER INFORMATION

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

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