

californicus), a rare vagrant in Illinois (Bohlen 1989).

The bird eventually flew, more clearly revealing an all-white tail and adult wing tip pattern. The bird then flew to the middle of the lake where it began feeding with some 1,000 Ring-billed Gulls.

— Robert Chapel

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Black Rail at Montrose Harbor

At 5:30 a.m. 30 May, 1994, Memorial Day, I started my daily birding routine from Montrose Beach, Chicago, looking for shorebirds. I observed three Semipalmated Sandpipers among Ring-billed and Herring Gulls at the beach. Disappointed, I headed toward the Magic Hedge beyond the stone sea wall bordering the park.

When I got up to the meadow, I leaned my bike against a tree and turned to scan the beach for shorebirds again from the higher elevation. Unexpectedly, many blackbirds and sparrows on the sidewalk below flushed and flew up into trees nearby.

One blackbird, flying oddly, as if tailless, caught my attention. It didn't fly up into the trees like the others.

Jumping from the meadow edge to the sidewalk, I expected to find an injured blackbird. When I couldn't see it anywhere, I began searching along the sidewalk and the meadow's edge.

Suddenly, a tiny black bird came out of the grass right below me. My breath stopped. This was not a blackbird. This was a Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*)! Watching from above, I had a perfect vantage to observe the bird without it noticing me, just a few feet away, as it walked calmly out onto the sandy sidewalk. The bird was sparrow-sized, with a tiny tail. The slate-gray head, with a short, stout, black beak, was followed by a dull, chestnut nape and a black back, covered with small, white speckles.

I slowly turned to look for other birders. Christine Philip and John Purcell were all the way back at the hedge. I hesitated to call to them, fearing I would scare this treasure bird, but I had no choice. I gestured to them to come over quickly. When I turned to look back at the rail, it had disappeared!

The other birders came to search for the bird on the sandy ground, which didn't seem to have enough grass to cover anything, yet we still couldn't see the bird.

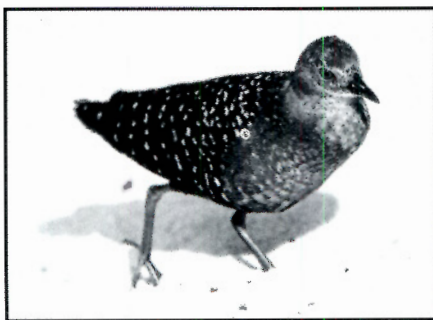
Finally, the Black Rail emerged from the thin, grassy tufts. Now we could see the ruby-red eyes with tiny black pupils, the dark, grayish lower chest, the black underparts with white barring on the flanks, and nearly black legs.

I cycled home to fetch my camera and called the rare bird hotline to report the sighting. I returned about 20 minutes later to find the bird still there. It was guarded by and was showing off for a few amused birders who had arrived while I was away. The rail walked out across the sandy pavement almost tamely, pecking here and there to feed. Once, it walked toward me and passed directly beneath my bike.

What a moment of pleasure to see such a rare and beautiful creature so closely! Did I ever dream I would find a Black Rail? Especially in Lincoln Park? Even John James Audubon had to paint from specimens alone, because he had never been able to see one alive.

I really never expected to see this bird, even though I had joked with other birders about seeing a Black Rail from the time of the 22 May 1993 Montrose Yellow Rail, which flushed up from my left foot (*Meadowlark* 2:139). That bird had performed some amazing disappearing acts in short grass near the Magic Hedge in front of a dozen deliriously happy birders.

There have been few records of this rare migrant and rare nester in Illinois (Bohlen 1989). One specimen was collected in Chicago 19 May



Black Rail, Montrose Beach,
Cook County, 30 May 1994.
Photo by Kanae Hirabayashi.



1984 (Bohlen 1989). A Black Rail was found dead 8 October 1993 at Chicago's lakefront (*Meadowlark* 3:61). Yellow and Black Rails are very rarely seen in any habitat, much less Montrose Harbor's park. The morning after my rare find, I heard that another birder had seen the Black Rail late the night before, at the same lucky place I had chosen to park my bike. The bird burrowed in the sand and hid all day in a small cluster of vegetation at the base of an ornamental crab apple tree, as Memorial Day picnics went on all around it.

I was delighted to share this sighting of the most elusive of all North American rails with many Chicago-area birders who added the species to their life lists. I can only hope that the bird safely reached its destination, despite its uncomfortable daytime stopover at Montrose.

— Kanae Hirabayashi

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