

YELLOW RAIL IN YOHO NATIONAL PARK

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During the spring of 1994, I was part of a team conducting a breeding bird survey as part of a wildlife study in support of the Ecological Land Classification for Yoho National Park, British Columbia. Several species found were new to the park, and the breeding status of several more was revised significantly. These records will be incorporated into the final report and the more significant findings may be published subsequently. The following sighting warrants more immediate publication.

On the morning of 10 June 1994, I was conducting breeding bird transects on the floodplain of the Kicking Horse River, about 800 m. west south-west of the Ottertail Viewpoint on Highway 1 and about 10 km. south of Field. The area being studied that morning was a VL1 Ecosite, defined by Achuff *et al.* (1993) as an ecosection incorporating wetland soils and vegetation occurring on fluvial landforms in the Montane Ecoregion, dominated by sedge fen.

The first transect at 05:30 yielded the expected Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*), Northern Waterthrush (*Seiurus noveboracensis*) and Lincoln's Sparrow (*Melospiza lincolni*) in marginal wet willows. I then moved west south-west to near the centre of an extensive sedge meadow to start the second transect of the day at 05:55. One minute into the transect, I heard the soft *tik-tik tik-tik-tik* of a Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) no more than 5 m. away, but to my consternation the calls lasted only 5 seconds and were not repeated during the rest of the 10 minute transect period. At the completion of the transect, I spent another 10 minutes searching for the bird and vocally imitating its call. Although the sedge was still relatively low and sparse, there was no subsequent sign nor sound of the bird, so I continued with the morning's work.

As the day progressed, I became less and less sure of what I had heard. I have heard Yellow Rails many times previously; in fact, there is a regular breeding location less than 5 km. from my house north-west of Calgary. However, the call was so short and so soft that I began to doubt my identification.

By the time I joined the rest of the team I was almost convinced that I had experienced a habitat-induced hallucination. Nevertheless, at dusk that evening Wayne Smith, Cliff Wallis, Cleve and Ray Wershler and I were

back in the sedge meadow suitably equipped with pairs of small pebbles to imitate the bird's call. As five simulated birds spread out across the meadow, it soon became obvious that the real bird probably could not have got a *tik* in sideways with all the noise. Limiting the pebble tapping to one person at a time considerably increased the chance of hearing a response, but no bird co-operated. At 22:00, with mosquitoes hanging in clouds around our heads, Cliff suggested that we quit the search for that day. At that moment, Ray, who was standing about 8 m. from where I had conducted the transect in the morning, said that he could see a bird moving through the sedge near him. He took one step towards it and up flew a small, darkish bird with obvious white secondaries forming two patches on the trailing edges of the wings: a Yellow Rail! (Figure 1). The bird flew with shivering, shallow wing beats (somewhat reminiscent of a Spotted Sandpiper, *Actitis macularia*) and with legs dangling, low over the sedge and dropped back into the marsh about 10 m. away. We quickly surrounded the bird and had excellent views as close as about 2 m. in the relatively thin vegetation.

The overall coloration of the head was a warm buff-brown. The top of the head had a dark brown cap contrasting with a fairly thick orange-brown supercilium. The bill was fairly short and symmetrical and appeared to be uniformly dark yellow. The lores were black, and a dark eye-line stretched back to the top of the auricular area. The rest of the plumage was essentially hidden in the vegetation, but we had an impression of a dark back with contrasting buffy feather edging, and orange-brown underparts. The bird appeared to move towards its simulated call, but uttered no sound of its own. The bird was flushed once more and then left in peace.

All five observers have had extensive field experience with the species. The quality and length of the observation, together with the brief, but diagnostic, call in the morning, left none of us with any doubt about the identity of the bird. The British Columbia Field Ornithologists Rare Birds Committee agreed by accepting the report unanimously (G. Davidson pers. comm. to M. K. McNicholl 3 November 1994).

The Yellow Rail was considered hypothetical in British Columbia (Campbell *et al.* 1990) with four previous records, three involving birds that were heard

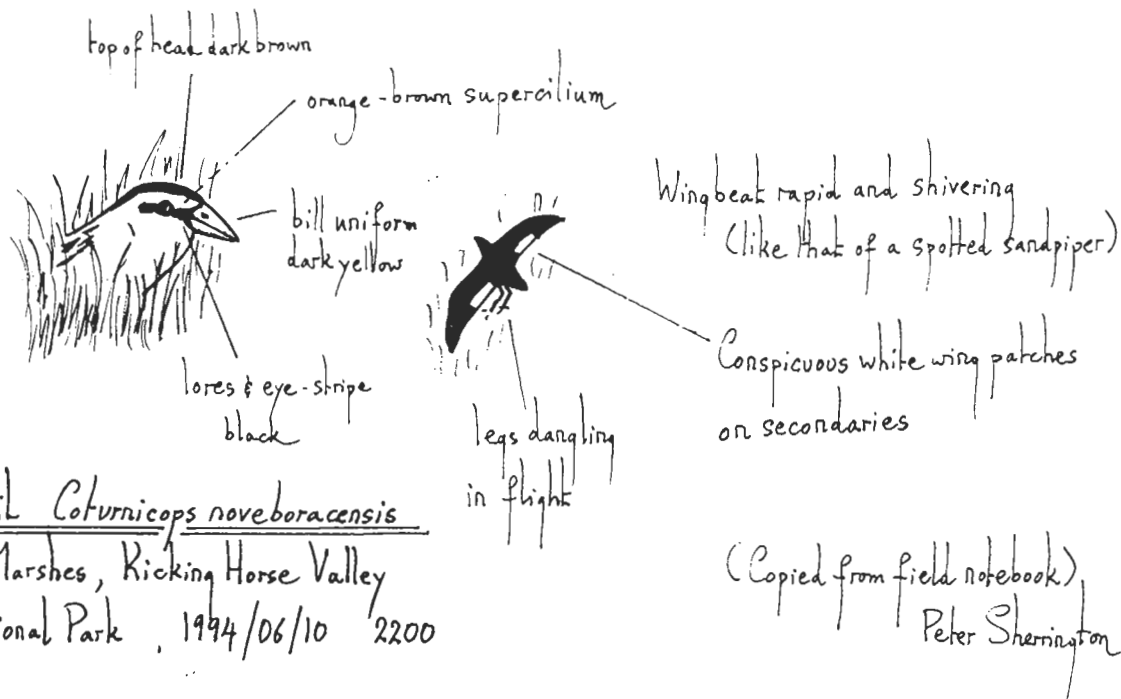


Figure 1: Field sketch of Yellow Rail observed in late evening, 10 June 1995 in Yoho National Park.

only, and one of a bird seen, but without adequate documentation. The closest record to Yoho National Park was of a bird heard between 29 June and 9 July 1964 at Lake Lillian in the East Kootenay. In Alberta, the species breeds mainly in the Central Parkland Region southwest to near Calgary (Semenchuk 1992). The only records from the Rocky Mountains are of two specimens taken at Jasper early in the twentieth century (Salt and Salt 1976). A scattering of records from the foothills west of Calgary possibly suggests some extension of its range in the last decade.

The silence of the bird observed in the evening, and the fact that it appeared to move towards the sound of a simulated call suggests that the bird might have been a female. The calling bird in the morning may have been a male. Certainly the habitat appears to be ideal for Yellow Rail breeding and is widespread in the Ottertail Marshes. As Yoho is due west of the mapped breeding range of the species in Alberta, the Yellow Rail may possibly breed regularly there, filling one of the gaps in its "imperfectly known" (Bookhout 1995) breeding range.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The comments of Mary Taitt on an earlier draft helped improve the manuscript. I am grateful to members of the B.C. Field Ornithologists Bird Records Committee for their prompt review of this record.

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