Acadiana's Outdoors
by Lloyd Abadie

RAILS ARE TIMID BIRDS

One of our learned friends once said "no body of us like the rails of the marsh and are more often heard than seen." That's very true. Rails are secretive birds and tend to shy away from any contact with humans.

Trying to spot a rail cackling in the swamp grass is a real exercise in futility. Tracking a calling bird, seemingly only a few feet away, is alike to trailing a wild o’ the wisp. It’s absolutely eerie the way the bird can melt into the grass without even shaking a stalk to mark its passage. But it’s all very logical. The expression “thin as a rail” is derived from the fact that rails are capable of yo-yoing, disappearing under the body laterally and are thereby able to slip between stalks of seemingly impenetrable grasses. Grasses so thick that it would seem impossible for the birds to pass through are negotiated with ease.

Some weeks ago while travelling a farm road between two rice fields at daybreak we came across a hen rail with a brood of 12 blind, chubby chicks crossing in front of us. We counted and were certain that the count was right. They disappeared in the roadside weeds and though we waited we never saw them again.

"Not so," our biologist friend inquired, "there was a brood of youngsters and you just missed seeing the other hen." Be that as it may, the sight impressed us and got us thinking about how the once popular game birds, the rails, are now neglected by the sportmen of the state.

Is it because rails are so seldom seen that they attract so little interest? Somewhere the rails have sportsmen changed so much that they recognize only the glamorous snowcock and the dull dyed turkey of waterfowl? Perhaps they seek only those species easy to come by — the doves, squirrels and rabbits — the prince of game birds, the bob white quail, is now sought after as avidly as heretofore because young hunters are no longer willing to trek after bird dogs in pursuit of this brown bombshell. It’s too exerting in this age of easy life.

We think that there is another reason. Perhaps it was the war, WW II and the resulting changes in the economy of the state. Somewhere the rails were forgotten by an entire generation so that at this time few residents of this hyperactive state have heard of the rails, let alone seen them. Perhaps a reminder is in order.

Rails are grand game birds and are delicious eating. How many of your friends have ever eaten rails? They’re much more tasty than chitterlings and haven’t been at Cajun fried rail cooked in a minimum amount of fat in a black iron pot, we know of no restaurants anywhere can match it.

And these birds are all around us in southwest Louisiana, especially but not exclusively in the rice country.

Louisiana can boast of two native species, the king and clapper rails. These are the largest of the rail family and are generally recognized as a fresh water marsh and silvery marsh dwelling. The rail will sometimes be found in saltwater marshes but the clapper is chief in swamps and prairie wetland habitat. Additionally, other four species of rails are migrants to the state. These are the Virginia, Sora, yellow and black rails. Though these are known to inhabit our Louisiana countryside at certain times to the point that they are quickly classified as common, we doubt that one in a thousand inhabitants have ever seen a yellow rail and it’s unlikely that five persons in a million have glimpsed the black rail in the Pelican State. But, they’re here.

The newly hatched young of all rails are glossy black regardless of the color of the parents so if you’ve seen black chicks in those days you have seen a black rail. Should you see a rail chick though, count yourself lucky. Not many Louisianaans enjoy that sight.

Rails are reluctant to fly when alarmed preferring to ease away silently through the grass as they race. Yet they migrate completely across our nation with no problem whatsoever, however, it is well known that completed the long journey they become sedentary again and will fly no further than a few feet. The beauty of any bird, except the mallard, a remarkable feat, but in no instance is it more amazing than in the case of the rail. Now, simply because rails are such poor flyers.

The more commonly seen rail like the Gallinule (the Purple Gallinule, Peter) and the Common Gallinule (we called it a blue rail years ago). These are frequently spotted in rice fields and are truly beautiful birds though they are so gaudily arrayed that they appear unreal. The head and neck are red and the wings are purple blue, the back and wings are olive green, the forehead is bare of feathers but is light blue in color. The feathers under the tail are white, the bill deep red, tipped with yellow and the legs are yellow. But, you’d better look quick when you spot one; it won’t give you much time to get a good look.

Because of the gallinules do some damage, by eating some rice but mainly by building nests of woven rice plants which can clog combines at harvest time, the birds are generally despised by rice farmers. There was a time when rice was cut and threshed. In those days the blue peters furnished great sport and many a late summer or fall supper was served by this thrashing.

With a little effort you may take advantage of a plentiful game species and have an abundance of rail from yellow hunters. Once you learn the technique of hunting rails you’ll enjoy outsmarting the birds. Thelimit is ten per day and the birds are delicious.

When you tell your friends that you’ve been rail hunting, you don’t want to bet they say, "Hunting, what?"