

THE SPOTTED RAIL, *PARDIRALLUS MACULATUS* IN JAMAICA

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In early 1994, three sightings of the Spotted Rail *Pardirallus maculatus* were reported from Jamaica. Only two sightings of the Spotted Rail have been reported (1977 and 1987) since the Gosse Bird Club began keeping records in 1963. Thus, the three reports for 1994 are unusual enough to merit particular notice. I also report on the breeding status of the species in Jamaica. Dr. Richard Banks of the National Biological Survey at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., kindly provided much of the information for this search.

All of the 1994 sightings were likely of the same individual and were made in the area of the Black River Morass, northeast of the town of Black River, St. Elizabeth parish, southwestern Jamaica. The first observation was made by a group of visiting birders, whereas the second and third were made by experienced bird watchers resident on the island. The lower morass is a complex of shallow brackish lagoons, tidal marshes, mudflats, and mangroves near the coast, with extensive freshwater marshes, seasonally flooded grassland, and swamp forest (Scott and Carbonnel 1986). This area is a continuation of the upper morass which, over many years, has been drained for various reasons and has been further degraded by pollution and activities such as the planting of rice. Many species, including several waterfowl, breed in the morass, although the area's importance, especially to those species considered threatened, has never been studied.

Early reports of Jamaica's birdlife, including those of Gosse (1847), Scott (1892), and Sclater (1910), did not include the Spotted Rail. The earliest mention that I have found is that of Bangs (1913), who said, "The Spotted Rail of Jamaica has undoubtedly become extinct, without a single example having been preserved, so far as I am aware." The implication here is that Bangs knew of its existence in Jamaica, but no source is given. Although Bond did not know of (or omitted) this reference in the preparation of his first edition of *Birds of the West Indies* (1936), this was rectified in his *Check-list* (1940), where he reported, "This species is said to have formerly occurred on Jamaica."

The next known record was attained in 1977, when Allan Keith (1979) observed a Spotted Rail in flight (at a distance of 6 m in full sunlight) on the Black River. The 1987 report (Downer 1987) was of a bird, having flown into a glass window, that was found dead in Mandeville (parish of Manchester, to the east of the Black River area). R. Banks (pers. comm.) notes that "rails are notorious wanderers" — is it possible that this was one such? The bird was prepared as a specimen but, unfortunately, while it was drying, the skull and crown were damaged by a rat. The salvaged specimen is deposited in the Institute of Jamaica's Natural History Division.

Downer and Sutton (1990) characterized the Spotted Rail

as "Unreported from Jamaica in the last one hundred years, until April 1977 (upper Black River Morass) and March 1987 (found dead in Mandeville)." Under *Status* they list the species as a "very rare winter visitor," but under *Range*, the entry reads "*P. m. inoptatus* Cuba, Dominican Republic, formerly Jamaica".

Lack (1976) doubted that the rail bred in Jamaica, as he wrote "Breeding has not been proven for ... [the] Spotted Rail (now extinct)." Lack also pointed out that (as far as birds are concerned) Jamaica is under-watched, so it is likely that it is also under-reported.

The American Ornithologists' Union [AOU] Check-list (1983) gives its distribution as: "Resident locally in ... Jamaica (at least formerly, a recent sight record from the Black River marshes)" This is derived from James Bond's entry in the 5th edition of his *Birds of the West Indies* (1985).

However, it appears that there is no basis for the AOU Check-list statement about former breeding on Jamaica, and the next edition will reflect this (R. Banks, pers. comm.). Further research is needed to reveal other early references to this species and to discover the source of Bangs' (1913) information. It would be valuable if studies on breeding and migratory species that use the Black River System could be soon undertaken before further habitat damage or destruction occurs.

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