

BAYLANDS

California Clapper Rail

The California Clapper Rail is a small brownish marsh bird 14 to 16.6 inches long with a slender body and relatively long legs. It has a buff colored front and white bars or stripes on its sides. The bird's two and a half inch long beak is relatively thick and curves downward to aid in feeding. The Rail has developed stout feet with long toes for walking on mud. Normally a very shy and secretive bird, the Clapper Rail can occasionally be seen carefully picking its way along the tidal channels of the marshland searching for food. The Rail eats a number of small sized marsh creatures including *polychaete* worms, snails, crabs and other crustaceans, insects, spiders, small mammals like mice, and an occasional small fish.

Cautious by nature, Rails rarely venture from the safety of their hiding places in the marsh grass. The best time of the year to view Clapper Rails is during winter's high tides, when the birds are flooded out of low areas of the marshlands. Though capable of limited flight, Rails rarely fly and prefer to swim or wade when crossing tidal channels. If startled, the Rail typically darts away over the ground and hides in nearby cordgrass or pickleweed. Its position is sometimes given away by the bird's habit of quickly flicking its tail or by its clapping call.

The Clapper Rail's nest is well hidden among the marsh plant growth, and is woven of pickleweed and cord grass. These materials enable the bowl shaped nest to float in the high tides of early summer, and will protect the eggs and chicks from the rising water. Between late March and July, the California Clapper will lay an average of 8 to 10 eggs. The 1 to 1.5 inch long eggs are a light buff or cream color with varying amounts of brown spots. Both parents take turns incubating the eggs, a process that lasts from 21 to 23 days. The downy chicks appear from April to August and are solid black in color.

The Clapper Rail has a number of native predators,

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including some birds of prey. Harriers, Red-tailed Hawks and Peregrine Falcons have been seen feeding on adult Rails. Nests often fall victim to the Norway Rat, a rodent that eats both the eggs and the chicks. The non-native Red Fox has also become a major threat to the dwindling Rail population.

Many natural predators have contributed to the Rail population decline in the San Francisco Bay. But the major reason is the decrease of their habitat by 85 percent since the turn of the century due to marshland development. Unfortunately Rails are only able to survive in salt marshes. As of January 1993 there were only 81 California Clapper Rails recorded in the Palo Alto Baylands Nature Preserve.

The Clapper Rail's original range was from Marin County to Los Angeles. Now, it can really only be found within the salt marshes of San Francisco Bay. Two other Rail sub-species live in California, but they too are endangered.

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