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TWO RECENT RECORDS OF THE CLAPPER RAIL FROM THE BALLONA WETLANDS, LOS ANGELES COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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I report on two recent records of the Clapper Rail (*Rallus longirostris*) from the Ballona Wetlands at Playa del Rey in Los Angeles County, including the first well-documented report in the county over 40 years, from a site where a population persisted into the 1950s. On 25 August 2008, two biological consultants (A. Gutierrez and R. Woodfield, with Merkel and Associates, San Diego) sampling fish in a tidal channel at the Ballona Wetlands just south of Ballona Creek spotted a bird they suspected was a Clapper Rail. On 21 January 2010 Gutierrez wrote to me, "on August 25, 2008 a Light-footed Clapper Rail was observed foraging along the eastern waterline of a channel in the pickleweed of the Ballona Wetlands. The observation occurred at 11:30 A.M. on a clear day, with no wind, a temperature of 70 °F, and during a low tide of 3.2 ft mean lower low water. Although it was a low tide, the water level was fairly high due to the tide being subject to muting and lag from the presence of tide gates at the Ballona Wetland. The Clapper Rail walked the edge of the high waterline from south to north and then back to the south, weaving through the pickleweed. After approximately 5 minutes, the Clapper Rail flew to the west shore of the channel and proceeded out of sight into the dense pickleweed."

Fortunately, (using a cell phone) Woodfield took a photograph (Figure 1) showing an unmistakable image of a Clapper Rail. However, news of this sighting never reached the local birding community, and the observers, who are not birders and are based in San Diego where the species is locally common, were not aware of its significance; I learned about it from an e-mail circulated by the Friends of Ballona Wetlands in mid-March 2009. Therefore, there is no way of knowing how long this bird was present at the location before or after this sighting.

Prior to this, David De Lange, a resident near the Ballona Wetlands, observed a Clapper Rail along lower Ballona Creek on two dates several days apart in late 1994 or early 1995 (not two birds, as reported by Cooper 2006), near the location of the 2008 sighting. He obtained a photograph that shows a Clapper Rail standing in shallow water amid clumps of mussels (Fig. 2). The slide (the mount is stamped "JAN 95") was recently located at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, confirming the identification.

The Light-footed Clapper Rail (*R. l. levipes*) is a sedentary subspecies endemic to the Pacific coast of North America from Santa Barbara south to northwestern Baja California, Mexico (van Rossem 1929, Grinnell and Miller 1944). Comprising three subspecies in the western United States (the others being *R. l. obsoletus* in the San Francisco Bay area and *R. l. yumanensis* in the lower Colorado River valley/Salton Trough), the Clapper Rail is rarely observed away from the immediate vicinity of the sites where it breeds, though in recent years it has apparently colonized previously unoccupied marshes in coastal San Diego County (Unitt 2004). Records of the Clapper Rail in atypical habitat in California (i.e., far from saltmarsh or brackish coastal wetlands), while extremely rare, are not unknown (see Orr 1939), and appear to have increased in frequency in the past 20 years, at least in San Diego County (*vide* P. Unitt). On 11 October 2008 T. A. Blackman and T. Hunefeld photographed a Clapper Rail, presumably dispersing in fall, on the lawn atop the bluffs at La Jolla, San Diego County. Through Project Wildlife, an association of wildlife rehabilitators, the San Diego Natural History Museum has received three specimens of the Light-footed Clapper Rail away from suitable habitat: one found at 5353 Banks

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St., San Diego, about 0.2 km north of the San Diego River and about 0.7 km from the nearest site where the species is resident in the San Diego River flood-control channel (29 September 2004; SDNHM 50948), one from 145 Cherry Ave., Carlsbad, about 1.8 km south-southeast of Buena Vista Lagoon, where the species is resident (10 July 2004; SDNHM 50958), and one from 633 Dorothy St., El Cajon, 10.5 km east-southeast of Kumeyaay Lake on the San Diego River, site of repeated recent observations if not residency (12 September 2005; SDNHM 51155). The last site is 22.5 km northeast of the Sweetwater River mouth on San Diego Bay, the nearest location where the Clapper Rail is resident in tidal saltmarsh. All three of these specimens are juveniles.

All three subspecies of the Clapper Rail in California, especially the southern coastal race *levipes* (designated endangered by both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and California Department of Fish and Game), have experienced dramatic population declines and range contractions, as coastal wetlands were drained and developed during the early 1900s. In Los Angeles County, the population loss has been total, and the species is considered extirpated (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Historically, the Clapper Rail was known in Los Angeles County from two main areas, the Ballona Wetlands near Venice and Playa del Rey on Santa Monica Bay (Cooper 2006) and a band of coastal wetlands that extended from the San Pedro area at the northeastern base of the Palos Verdes Peninsula, southeast through Long Beach (and continuing into southern Orange County; Grinnell and Miller 1944). A search of specimen records from Los Angeles Co. through www.ornisnet.org yields 18 from Long Beach/Alamitos Bay (1895–1918), eight from the Ballona area (1901–1933), and seven from San Pedro/Wilmington (1879–1899). Nest/egg records from the county (at the Western Foundation for Vertebrate Zoology) include these areas as well as an egg set collected in 1906 at “Nigger Slough” (modern-day Carson, just inland of San Pedro). Reported by Willett (1912), this set suggests some acceptance of freshwater or at least brackish marsh habitat along the coastal plain, since the 1980s a situation also found locally in the San Diego area and in northern Baja California, Mexico (Hamilton et al. 2002, Unitt 2004). The San Pedro–Long Beach population of the Clapper Rail was presumably lost in the early 1900s, a victim of the construction of the massive twin ports at Los Angeles and Long Beach and the elimination of essentially all saltmarsh. However, the population at the Ballona Wetlands persisted until the mid-1950s (until the construction of Marina del Rey), with an isolated report of a calling bird in 1966 (Cooper 2006).

Today the two Clapper Rail populations nearest Los Angeles County, at Mugu Lagoon, Ventura County, and Alamitos Bay, Orange County, are separated by a distance of just over 100 km (with Ballona lying roughly equidistant between the two sites), so exchange between the two populations—and any chance of natural recolonization of the Ballona area—should be minimal. However, in 1983 Zembal et al. (1985) found a Clapper Rail at Seal Beach that had been banded at Newport Bay in September 1982, representing dispersal of more than 20 km. In the San Francisco Bay area the California Clapper Rail (*R. l. obsoletus*) has been recorded dispersing nearly 45 km (Casazza et al. 2008). In Imperial County, on 28 April 2009, Patrick del Pizzo found a mummified Yuma Clapper Rail (*R. l. yumanensis*, SDNHM 52286) under the power-transmission line along the international border 1.2 km west-southwest of Gray’s Well, 1.0 km from the All-American Canal but 15 km from the Colorado River and 31 km from the Imperial Valley.

Captive-reared birds apparently disperse farther than wild-reared birds (*vide* R. Zembal); one captive-reared individual released at Mugu Lagoon was recaptured at Upper Newport Bay, Orange County, 106 days later (Zembal et al. 2007), a distance of well over 100 km, along a route that almost certainly would have passed by the Ballona Wetlands. It is likely that both birds recorded recently from the Ballona Wetlands originated from one of these two populations, and possibly the one seen in 2008 was one of several captive-reared birds released at Mugu Lagoon earlier, though the photograph does not reveal if it was banded. The 1994–95 sighting predates these releases, which began in 2001 (R. Zembal pers. comm.).

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Figure 1. Clapper Rail, Ballona Wetlands, 25 August. 2008. Note: the yellow bar was on the original image that accompanied an e-mail message circulated in late 2008.

Photo by Rachel Woodfield



Figure 2. Clapper Rail on Ballona Creek, late 1994 or early 1995.

Photo by David De Lange

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With approximately 28 hectares of muted-tidal pickleweed (*Salicornia* spp.) marsh (Santa Monica Bay Restoration Commission, unpubl. data), the Ballona Wetlands represent the largest fragment of saltmarsh remaining in Los Angeles County; they also support one of two remaining Los Angeles County populations of another species restricted to coastal saltmarsh, the Belding's Savannah Sparrow, *Passerculus sandwichensis beldingi* (PWA 2006). Prior to 2008, the Ballona Wetlands were the object of general bird surveys in 1979–80, 1990–91, and 1995 and directed surveys for the Clapper Rail in 1995 and 2001; none revealed the species (PWA 2006). However, because of a dearth of suitable habitat, the Ballona Wetlands are generally not included in the rangewide census of the Clapper Rail taken annually since 1980 (R. Zembal pers. comm.), and the bulk of the saltmarsh at the Ballona Wetlands has been off limits to the public for several decades, with only visual access at a distance through a chain-link fence. So, while it is clear that a population of the Clapper Rail is no longer present at this location, these two records indicate that the species still has the potential to occur, if only as a vagrant.

Kimball Garrett first brought the 1994–95 Ballona Clapper Rail photograph to my attention, and I thank both him and Philip Unitt for their helpful comments on the manuscript. I thank Edith Read for first bringing the 2008 sighting to my attention and David De Lange, Rachel Woodfield, and Antonette Gutierrez for permission to use their photographs and for offering additional details on their observations. Richard Zembal (Orange County Water District) provided copious information about the current status of the Clapper Rail in southern California, Philip Unitt kindly tracked down recent specimens of dispersing birds from San Diego County, and Terry Hunefeld and Thomas A. Blackman provided information about the 2008 sighting in La Jolla.

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