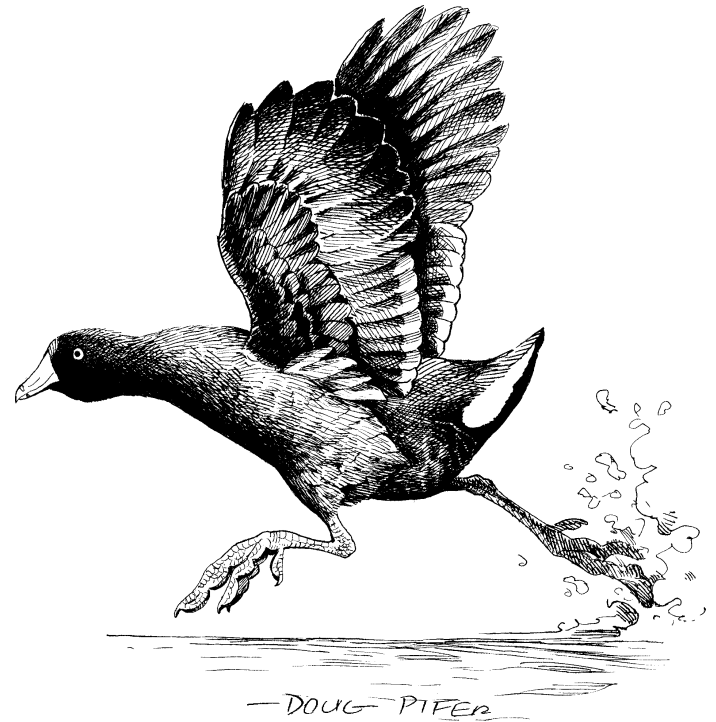




Wildlife Note — 57  
LDR0103

# Rails, Moorhen and Coot



By Chuck Fergus

Sneak a canoe down a twisting marsh channel and you may glimpse one of the five kinds of rails that migrate through Pennsylvania or breed here. In areas of deeper water, look for common moorhens or American coots. The best times to see these wetland birds are during their spring and fall migrations. Rails, moorhens and coots all belong to the family Rallidae.

Rails, coots and moorhens are classified as migratory game birds, and hunting season and bag limit frameworks are set annually by the US Fish and Wildlife Service. In Pennsylvania only the sora and Virginia rail, along with the moorhen and coot, are legal game.

Highly secretive, rails creep about through thick marsh vegetation. Many are more active at night than during the day and often are heard rather than seen. When a hiker or duck hunter does stumble upon a rail, it will usually run away through the grass rather than take to the air.

Rails' narrow bodies let them slip between dense cattails and sedges. They search for food by walking about on their long-toed feet, often clamoring over lily pads and other emergent or submerged vegetation. Some of the rails swim readily; flanges of skin on each toe push against the water to provide propulsion, then fold backwards on the return stroke to reduce resistance.

Most rails are omnivorous. Some species concentrate on plants

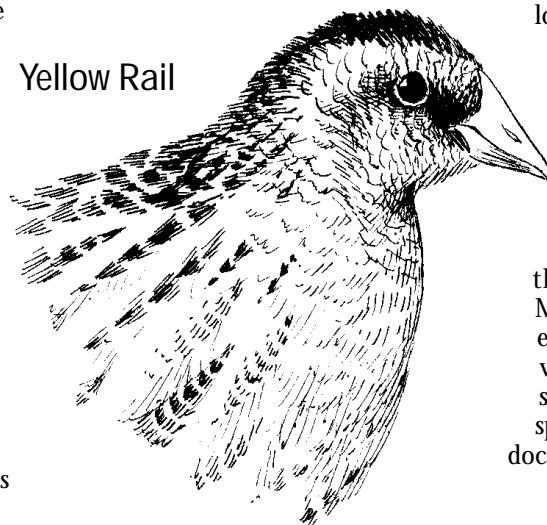
(mainly seeds, leaves and roots of aquatic plants), while others dine on insects, spiders, snails, crayfish and other invertebrates. The shape of a rail's bill is a good clue to its feeding habits: the king rail has a sharp bill like a heron's, for snatching prey, while the black rail uses its shorter, more generalized bill for picking up seeds of bulrushes and other marsh plants, as well as for catching insects and crustaceans.

Rails nest among dense vegetation, either on the ground or in reeds above shallow water. Most lay 5 to 12 cryptically colored eggs and incubate them for three to four weeks. The downy chicks leave the nest soon after hatching. Both parents are thought to feed the young.

**Yellow Rail** (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) — Ornithologists frequently describe the yellow rail as one of the most secretive birds in North America.

This yellowish species breeds mainly in southern and central Canada and winters along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. In Pennsylvania the yellow rail is a very rare migrant, occasionally passing through in late April and early May and again in September and early October. The species eats a variety of insects as well as many seeds. Only five sightings of this species in Pennsylvania have been documented since 1959.

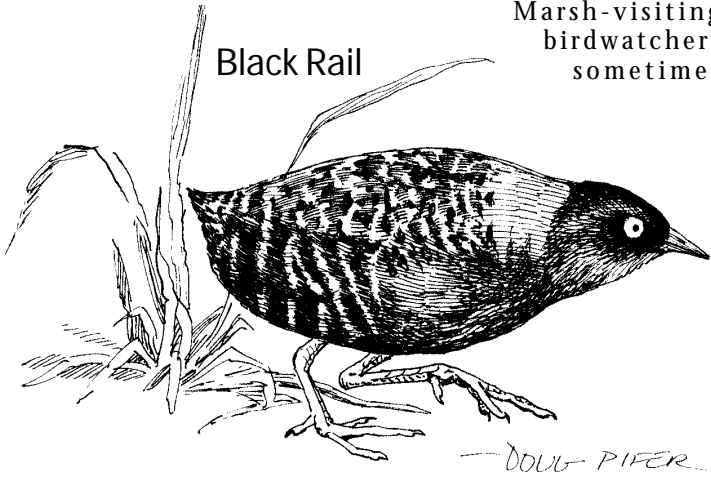
Yellow Rail



**Black Rail** (*Laterallus jamaicensis*) — This slate-colored, sparrow-size bird breeds in tidal marshes from New Jersey to Florida, and in inland marshes south of the Great Lakes. Most authorities doubt that it nests in Pennsylvania, but singing birds have been found in May and June in scattered wetland sites in southern Pennsylvania on about five occasions in the past 20 years.

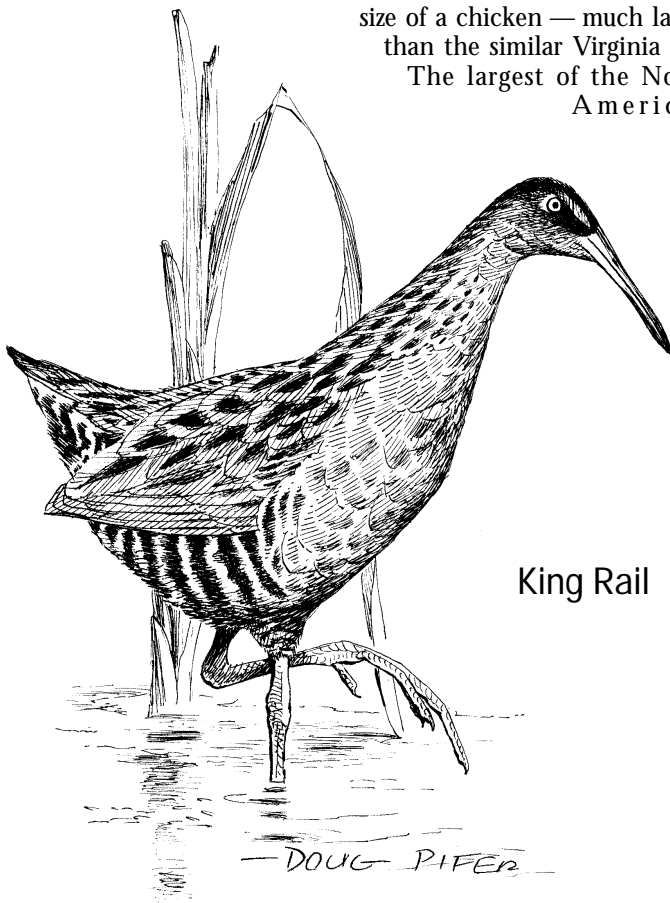
Marsh-visiting  
birdwatchers  
sometimes

Black Rail



glimpse black rails during the spring and fall migrations. The species winters in the southern United States, Central America and the Caribbean Islands.

**King Rail** (*Rallus elegans*) — One of Pennsylvania's rarest breeding birds, the king rail has been designated a state endangered species. Its breeding range is centered on the Southeastern and Midwestern states. The king rail is reddish in color and about the size of a chicken — much larger than the similar Virginia rail. The largest of the North American

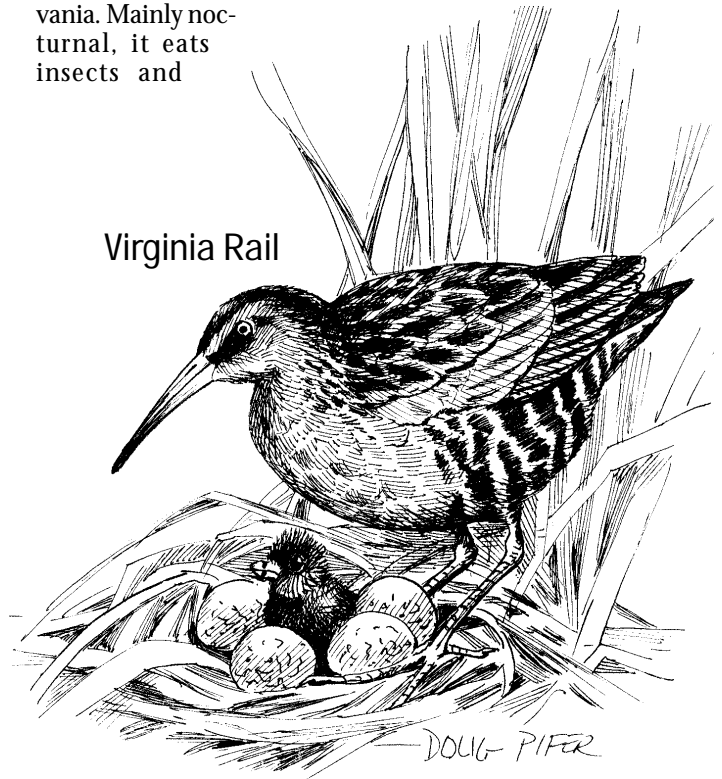


King Rail

rails, it preys on frogs and small fish, as well as many aquatic insects. In Pennsylvania, it used to be found in the wetlands around the Philadelphia Airport, but development pressure has eliminated most habitat. This species has nested in a range of other wetlands, from the large marshes in Crawford County to small areas in Tioga and Mercer counties. Little is known of its migration patterns.

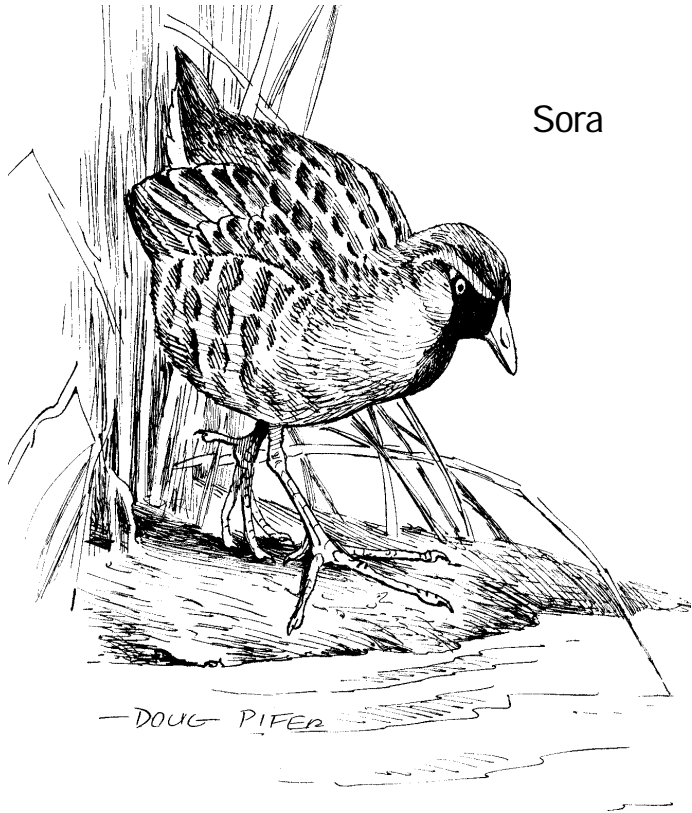
**Virginia Rail** (*Rallus limicola*) — The Virginia rail breeds in wetlands with sedges and cattails in scattered locations across Pennsylvania. Mainly nocturnal, it eats insects and

Virginia Rail



their larvae, including beetles, flies and dragonflies. Virginia rails build a nest on a platform of cattails, grasses and reeds, in a dry zone of the marsh, where living vegetation may form a canopy overhead. The state's largest population is centered in Crawford County, the only place where this species could be considered common during the summer. While patterns may be poorly known, Virginia rails enter the state during April and most leave by the end of October.

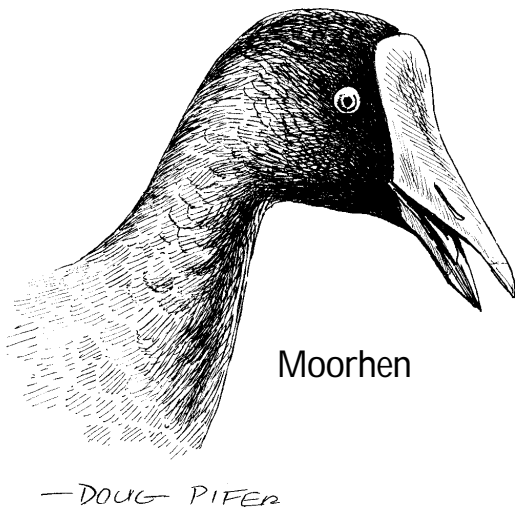
**Sora** (*Porzana carolina*) — The most widespread and abundant of the North American rails, the sora breeds across Canada and the northern United States, including Pennsylvania, and winters in the southern states and Central and South America. With its short bill, the sora eats primarily seeds. I have seen this bird on several occasions in the Bog Natural Area at Black Moshannon State Park; once, when I was snooping around in a pair of hip boots, a sora lifted from the grass a few feet ahead, then fluttered weakly into the reeds. I hope someday to hear the species' song, which has been described as "an explosive, descending musical whinny."



Sora

Interest in sora and Virginia rail hunting in Pennsylvania is very low and the harvest is negligible, due to the lack of extensive wetland habitats and low population densities. Hunting pressure is highest along the wintering areas of the southeast Atlantic coast where large tidal marshes concentrate wintering rails and moorhens. In 1996, a national Harvest Information Program (HIP) was created as a way to obtain accurate information on harvest and hunter participation.

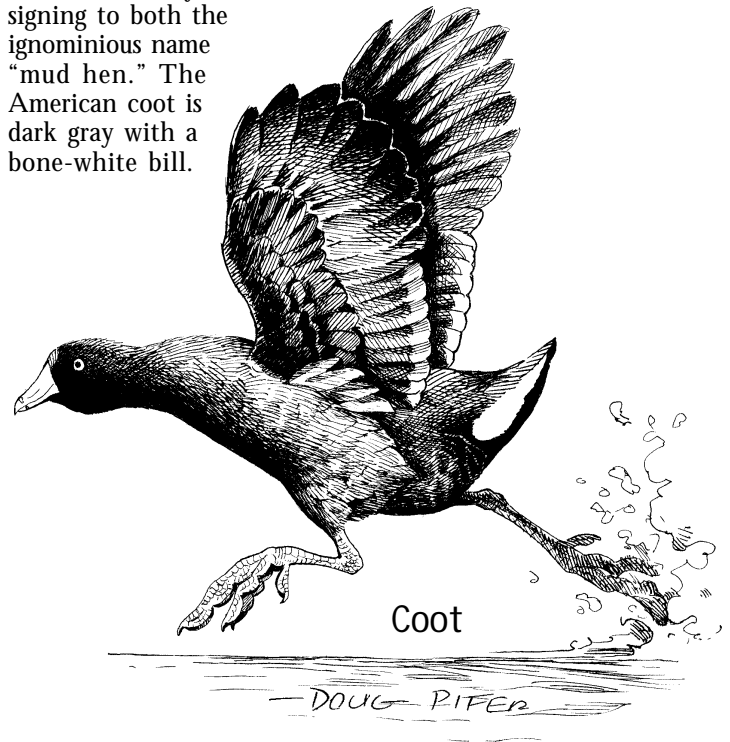
**Moorhen** (*Gallinula chloropus*) — The common moorhen was formerly called the common or Florida gallinule. It sounds an assortment of cackles, clucks, croaks



Moorhen

and squawks, which help make a marsh a magical, spooky place at night. Moorhens are mainly dark gray, with red bills; while swimming they make pumping motions with their heads. They favor deeper water than the rails and often swim among water lilies and pondweeds. Moorhens feed on buds, leaves and seeds of water plants, fruits and berries of dry-land plants, and a variety of insects and other invertebrates. They nest mainly in thick cattails. In Pennsylvania moorhens nest around Pymatuning Reservoir and Conneaut Marsh and in scattered wetlands elsewhere in the state, but they are nowhere common. Populations around Tinicum Environmental Education Center in Philadelphia have declined precipitously in recent years with the loss of wetland habitat there. Moorhens migrate in spring and fall to wintering areas from coastal North Carolina southward.

**Coot** (*Fulica americana*) — The American coot is an uncommon breeder in Pennsylvania but a common to abundant migrant and regular winter resident. Many hunters lump it in with the moorhen by consigning to both the ignominious name "mud hen." The American coot is dark gray with a bone-white bill.



Coot

Noisy and gregarious, coots often form flocks. They eat mainly plant foods but also take insects, fish, tadpoles, snails, crayfish, and the eggs of other birds. They feed like ducks, upending in shallow water; dive to get at plants; and graze on land. To take off from the water they must first run along on the surface to build up speed. Coots need extensive marshlands for breeding. In Pennsylvania they nest mainly in the northwest, around Pymatuning and in other wetland areas. During mild winters, when lakes and rivers don't freeze over, many coots may winter in Pennsylvania. Coots may be found in large rafts, numbering hundreds of birds, on open lakes and ponds during winter.

# Wildlife Notes

Allegheny Woodrat  
Bats  
Beaver  
Black Bear  
Blackbirds, Orioles, Cowbird and Starling  
Blue Jay  
Bobcat  
Bobwhite Quail  
Canada Goose  
Chickadees, Nuthatches, Titmouse and Brown Creeper  
Chimney Swift, Purple Martin and Swallows  
Chipmunk  
Common Nighthawk and Whip-Poor-Will  
Cottontail Rabbit  
Coyote  
Crows and Ravens  
Diving Ducks  
Doves  
Eagles and Ospreys  
Elk  
Finches and House Sparrow  
Fisher  
Flycatchers  
Foxes (Red & Gray)  
Gray Catbird, Northern Mockingbird and Brown Thrasher  
Hérons  
Kingfisher  
Mallard  
Mice and Voles  
Minks & Muskrats  
Northern Cardinal, Grosbeaks, Indigo Bunting and Dickcissel

Opossum  
Otter  
Owls  
Porcupine  
Puddle Ducks  
Raccoon  
Rails, Moorhen and Coot  
Raptors  
Ring-necked Pheasant  
Ruby-throated Hummingbird  
Ruffed Grouse  
Shrews  
Snowshoe Hare  
Sparrows and Towhee  
Squirrels  
Striped Skunk  
Tanagers  
Thrushes  
Vireos  
Vultures  
Weasels  
White-tailed Deer  
Wild Turkey  
Woodchuck  
Woodcock  
Wood Duck  
Woodpecker  
Wood Warblers  
Wrens

Wildlife Notes are available from the  
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Bureau of Information and Education  
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