

This resource is based on the following source:

Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

This resource can be cited as:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2003, January 6. Florida's breeding bird atlas: A collaborative study of Florida's birdlife. <http://www.myfwc.com/bba/> (Date accessed mm/dd/yyyy).

Black Rail *Laterallus jamaicensis*

If any species of Florida breeding bird deserves to be called secretive, it is the Black Rail, the smallest rail in the state. It inhabits densely vegetated marshes where it would be largely undetected if not for its distinctive vocalizations. The difficulty of seeing this rail accounts for its being one of the most wanted species by birders.

It breeds very locally in coastal California and Kansas, on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts from New York through Florida to east Texas, and in Belize, Peru, Chile, and Argentina (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

Black Rails are usually found in association with one or more species of tuft-forming cordgrass. This tufted growth is distinctive and easily recognized. In the tidal marshes of the Gulf coast, the cordgrass grows in a narrow band separating the black needle rush marsh from upland areas. Black Rails may be found in this zone mixed marsh grasses or in nearby stands of pure black rush. Some of these areas of high marsh contain scattered salt myrtle bushes. This 1-m (3-ft) tall shrub, with its light green foliage, is an excellent marker for suitable Black Rail habitat. In central Florida large areas are dominated by the cordgrass, producing extensive savannas with scattered cabbage palm islands. At these sites the wetter marshes are characterized by sawgrass which frequently grows taller than 2 m (6 ft). An exception to the association of Black Rails and tufted cordgrass occurs on Merritt Island in Brevard County, where the birds are most frequently seen in areas dominated by spike grass.

Black Rails build their nests of green or dead grasses, on moist ground, or just above the ground or water and attached to weed or grass stalks (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

Egg dates are 3 May through 11 August. Birds have been found during migration between March and May and again in October and November.

Black Rails are permanent residents in upper tidal marshes along the Gulf coast from Texas to Florida, and are also found in inland marshes of the Florida peninsula. Within Florida the species is found in the higher parts of tidal marshes, which are rarely inundated. The Atlas project found birds on the Gulf coast from Gulf to Dixie counties and in the Tampa Bay area. The inland population is centered in the St. Johns River Valley from Lake Woodruff in Volusia County southward to Brevard County. It is also known from Paynes Prairie in Alachua County and in portions of the Everglades. In 1989 Runde et al. (1990) recorded singing males at Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), St. Johns NWR, St. Vincent NWR, St. Marks NWR and vicinity, the Big Bend Wildlife Management Area (WMA) (Taylor County), and Jena WMA in Dixie County. In 1991 up to 20 rails were calling on territory at the end of S.R. 361 in Dixie County (Wamer in Langridge 1991). The Black Rail unquestionably occurs in other areas of the state, but its secretive behavior has prevented it from being located.

Noel Wamer

Sponsored by Gail Bartle

Black Rail

