



Rails, Moorhen, and Coot



yellow rail

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 Family Rallidae.

Rails

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 clambering 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 feeders. 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 shapes of rails' bills vary with their 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 or shrubs above shallow water. Most lay five to twelve 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 – Ornithologists frequently describe the yellow rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) 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 rare migrant, 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.

The **black rail** (*Laterallus jamaicensis*) is a slate-colored, sparrow size bird. It 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. Marsh visiting birdwatchers sometimes glimpse black rails during the spring and fall migration. The species winters in the southern United States, Central America, and the Caribbean Islands.

The **king rail** (*Rallus eleuans*) is one of Pennsylvania's rarest breeding birds and 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. The largest of the North American rails, it can prey on frogs and small fish, as well as many aquatic insects.

black rail



king rail



The **sora** (*Porzana Carolina*) is the most widespread and abundant of the North American rails. It 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. The species' song has been described as "an explosive, descending musical whinny".

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

Virginia rail



sora



moorhen

The common moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) was formerly called the common or Florida gallinule. It sounds an assortment of cackles, clucks, croaks, and squawks that help make the 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. Moorhens migrate in spring and fall to wintering areas from coastal North Carolina southward.



Coot

The American coot (*Fulica Americana*) is an uncommon breeder in Pennsylvania but a common to abundant migrant. The American coot is dark gray with a bone white bill. 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 Reservoir and in other wetland areas. During mild winters when lakes and rivers don't freeze over, many coots may winter in Pennsylvania.

