



The Georgia Department of Natural Resources
Wildlife Resources Division
CLAPPER RAIL FACT SHEET



SPECIES DESCRIPTION

The clapper rail (*Rallus longirostris*), commonly known as a marsh hen, is a member of the rail family (*Rallidae*). At 14 - 16 inches (35 to 40 cm) from beak to tail, they have gray-brown backs and sides and a cinnamon-colored underside. Their sides have vertical white bars, which serve as an effective camouflage as the background sunlight shines through the tall reeds and grasses of its marsh habitat. They have a narrow body, long down-curved bill, and an extremely short up-turned tail. Sexes look alike, but males birds are slightly larger than females. They are named for their loud, clattering call that resembles the sound of an old-fashioned toy wood clapper. This rattling call is one of the most familiar sounds in salt marshes during summer. Generally secretive, high tides can force them into view along paths and floating debris in the marsh. Otherwise, they are most often glimpsed as they dart across tidal creeks between sheltering grasses. These solitary, elusive birds are more often heard than seen. Rails rarely fly and prefer to run or swim when feeling threatened. It is most vocal at dusk but may be startled into calling by any sudden loud noise.

BIOLOGY

Nesting takes place between March and July. During courtship, the male signals the female by standing visibly still, stretching his neck upward, and opening his bill or pointing it downward to swing his head from side to side. He may also serve the female with food. Both male and female build nests that are usually placed 8 - 12 inches (20 to 30 cm) above the ground in clumps of high marsh grasses near the upper reaches of high tide. Constructed of grasses and sedges (grass-like herbs), the cup-shaped nest is 7 - 10 inches (18 to 25 cm) across and is lined with finer grasses. The pair also builds a ramp of plant material leading from the ground up to the nest, sometimes weaving a canopy of green sedges above the nest. Their diet consists of a variety of small prey, including crabs, crayfish, fish, aquatic insects, mollusks, worms and frogs. Rails feed mostly at low tide, walking in water or along mud banks where they probe for food with their long bill.

RANGE AND HABITAT

Clapper rails are found along the east coast of North America, coasts and some islands of the Caribbean, and across northern South America to eastern Brazil. On the west coast, they breed from central California through Mexico and south to northwestern Peru. They also inhabit freshwater marshes of the southwestern United States and the mangrove swamps of the Southeast. In Georgia, they are common in expansive salt and brackish marshes along the coast.

PREDATION

Clapper Rails are subject to avian predation from Northern harrier, red-shouldered hawk, peregrine falcon, and Cooper's hawk. Raccoons, mink, and fox also prey on these birds and their nests.

HUMAN INTERACTION

In Georgia, clapper rails are a commonly hunted game bird during the regulated season. To be most successful, hunters pursue birds during extremely high tides in the fall, when tidal amplitude exceeds 8 feet. By push poling or paddling a small boat across the flooded marsh, a hunter can flush clapper rail from floating islands of marsh wrack and debris. At low tide, some hunters quietly maneuver boats through tidal creeks while birds feed atop mud flats. Clapper rails are not fast fliers, but offer hunters a challenge because they often run, swim or use their excellent camouflage for elusion.

