

VOCALIZATION OF THE VIRGINIA RAIL: A MYSTERY SOLVED

by E. Manley Callin, Fort San, Saskatchewan

Certain notes of the Virginia Rail (*Rallus limicola*) have been the subject of an international mystery which began at Cambridge, Massachusetts on June 7, 1889 and ended at Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan on July 6, 1964 (75 years later!). In the October, 1901 issue of the *Auk*, William Brewster (1901) described some bird notes, rail-like in character, which he had heard in various wet meadows or marshy areas in Massachusetts during five different years from 1889 to 1901 and which were wholly new to him and also to two of his associates. Brewster very aptly described the song as "ending in a shrill, slightly tremulous squeal or crow, given with exceeding emphasis and vigor," indicated that one of the many variations might be phoneticized as "kik-kik-kik-keer" and that the final note was occasionally doubled and sometimes wholly omitted. (Even triple endings have been heard at Fort Qu'Appelle.) Although he went to considerable effort, Brewster was never able to obtain a glimpse of the birds or to identify them, either by sight or sound, and because the song invariably began with a series of "kicking" notes, the bird has since been unofficially dubbed as Brewster's "kicker."

The next links in the chain of events were as follows:

1. Dr. Peter P. Kellogg of Cornell University, Dr. Arthur A. Allen, and others made a night recording of a "kicker" in June, 1937 at a marsh south of Ithaca, New York, and
2. In 1959 Kellogg, Allen and Dr. Roger Tory Peterson published these calls in a recorded album and identified them as those of the Yellow Rail (Kellogg, 1962). This publication sparked some controversy as to what the birds "were not" but did not elicit any strong opinions as to what they "were"; it did, however, point out the pronounced difference between the

song of the Black Rail and that of the "kicker."

In the early 1960's the scene shifted to Saskatchewan with the following events: on May 28, 1961, from 9:30 to 10:30 p.m., I heard two "kickers" calling in the marsh at Echo Lake at Fort Qu'Appelle; on June 16, 1962 several members of the Saskatchewan Natural History Society (including Margaret Belcher and myself) heard the same notes in a marshy area at the west end of Pasqua Lake, which is about 15 miles to the west of Fort Qu'Appelle; in the December, 1962 issue of the *Blue Jay* (20:153) Belcher referred to the 1962 record and, in doing so, added further impetus to the search for the identity of the "kicker." From June 24 to June 26, 1963 Jack Lane of Brandon, Manitoba and Oscar M. Root of North Andover, Massachusetts visited at Fort Qu'Appelle and, although two "kickers" were calling regularly each night, it was not possible to see the birds even with the aid of lights, and the mystery remained unsolved. During the next two weeks, June 27 to July 11, 1963, 18 persons (including seven from Regina on one occasion) took part in the search. Dr. G. D. Barnett made tape recordings on several occasions, but again the singing birds (now found to be four in number) could not be seen or identified. A copy of these recordings was forwarded to Kellogg who, in his letter of February 7, 1964, expressed the opinion that they were indeed the mystery bird which they had recorded in 1937. In the meantime, Fred Lahrmann had reported hearing a "kicker" at the Wascana marsh at Regina on two successive evenings in mid-May of 1962 and, on June 27 and 28, 1963, he and Ralph Carson, both staff members of the Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History, heard one at a small unnamed lake near

Jan Lake, which is about 300 air miles north of Fort Qu'Appelle. Also, Lane and Root, upon returning from Fort Qu'Appelle in 1963, heard a "kicker" from June 28 to June 30 in the extensive Douglas Marsh, near Brandon, Manitoba and it was heard there again by Lane and Hagar in 1964.

Joseph A. Hagar of Marshfield Hills, Massachusetts, retired state ornithologist, had for some years been accumulating reports of the mysterious "kicker" and this had added up to about 27 credible records, mostly near the eastern coast of the United States. The reports from Saskatchewan and Manitoba represented a drastic extension in the apparent range of the "kicker" and on July 3, 1964 Hagar arrived at Fort Qu'Appelle to continue the search. Almost immediately it was noted that, although Brewster's birds in Massachusetts and also the Fort Qu'Appelle birds in 1963 called very steadily in the late evening and during the night, the only bird heard after Hagar's arrival gave very few calls at this time. Hagar then speculated that the bird might be calling in the early morning and, if so, this might provide an opportunity for daylight observation. During the next few mornings Hagar and I were at the marsh before sunrise and on the morning of July 6, 1964 the mystery was finally solved. Shortly after 4:00 a.m. Hagar was deep in the cattails and, after a period of watchful waiting, saw both a male and female Virginia Rail and a chick about half-size. The male had been uttering the usual notes of the Virginia Rail from the cattails about 20 feet away, then gave the "kicker" notes and immediately afterward appeared in plain sight about 15 feet distant. Aside from the difference in time of calling as mentioned above, there were also very pronounced differences in the assortment of calls in 1964; compared with 1963, the "kicker" notes were much fewer and the usual notes of the Virginia much more frequent. Some notes were recorded on tape each day from July

4 to July 6, 1964 and Hagar later took this tape to Cornell University where copies were made.

When one weighs all the factors, including the distribution of the various rails and the association of sounds in the recordings and field notes from Fort Qu'Appelle it is virtually impossible to consider the "kicker" as anything else but the Virginia Rail. The climaxing factor, of course, is Hagar's observations on July 6, 1964 but one of the contributory points which should be mentioned is that, during the many hours of listening to and sometimes recording the "kicker" notes in the Fort Qu'Appelle area from 1961 to 1964, there were never any sounds resembling the measured, tapping notes attributed to the Yellow Rail and with which I am familiar.

However, the answer to the 75-year-old mystery has raised as many questions as it answered! Kellogg, in his letter of August 24, 1964, offered congratulations and summed up the situation as follows: "There still remains the problem of explaining why the sound, if it comes from a Virginia Rail, is heard so seldom. Certainly, in this area [Ithaca, New York], the Virginia Rail could be called common and I believe that it is as abundant here as anywhere in its range, yet the sound was heard only the one time. If you had heard the bird call only once or twice, in all your experience, it would have fitted nicely into the picture. However, your recordings show conclusively that this seems to be a definite pattern of the species repeated over and over, and heard day after day in the right locality. This makes the sound still very much of a mystery."

It should be pointed out that, in at least two years (1889 and 1898), the "kicker" notes were heard regularly in Massachusetts and also at Fort Qu'Appelle in two years (regularly in 1963 and irregularly in 1964) but those were the only years in which there was fairly close observation at appropriate times in the latter area. One should also add that, although

the usual "kidick" and "wak, wak" notes of the Virginia have been heard in 11 recent years in various parts of our area, they are seldom uttered steadily. A close study of the vocalization of other rails, such as the Sora, Yellow and Black, in various areas of our continent might also produce some surprising inconsistencies. It could be many more years before the status (is it the real song?) and prevalence of the "kicker" notes are determined. Probably the greatest need at present is a complete analysis of the many reports to date; it is rather likely that this would reveal erratic vocalizing by the rails and also erratic attention by observers. Certainly it would be difficult for observers to maintain a continuous vigil in the various areas and over one or more complete nesting seasons but this may be necessary in order to obtain the complete answer.

Credit is due to many people in the search for identity of the "kicker" but very special credit should be given to Brewster, who first reported it, and to Hagar, who conceived the successful approach in solving the mystery. Others who deserve special mention are Kellogg, Allen, Peterson, Barnett and Belcher, who contributed most valuable recordings and/or articles, to Lane and Root, who were very prominent in the search, and to Doug Wade, who edited the Fort Qu'Appelle recordings of 1963.

NOTE: In a long letter dated April 8, 1968, Hagar has advised me that observations at Concord, Massachusetts in 1965, at Troy Meadows, New Jersey in 1962 (not reported to Hagar until 1967), and at Camden, New Jersey in 1967, strongly confirm the conclusions reached at Fort Qu'Appelle in 1964.

LITERATURE CITED

- Brewster, William. 1901. An ornithological mystery. *Auk*, 18:321-328.
Kellogg, P. P. 1962. Vocalizations of the Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis*) and the Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*). *Auk*, 79:698-701.

CINNAMON TEAL AT FORT QU'APPELLE

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At about 4:00 P.M. on May 1, 1968, as I was leaving Fort Qu'Appelle to return to Fort San, I followed my frequent custom of checking for a few minutes at the Fort Qu'Appelle dam. It was a very windy, dusty day and a flock of about 55 ducks were resting or swimming about on the river in the shelter of the willows on the leeward side. It was immediately noted that the flock included a number of Blue-winged and Green-winged Teals, neither of which I had seen previously this spring, and that Lesser Scaups were predominant. My attention was then drawn to a dark bird which showed extensive areas of pronounced reddish colour when it turned about and I quickly realized that I was looking at the first Cinnamon Teal I had ever seen (it had somewhat the colour but very obviously did not have the markings or shape of the Ruddy Duck). Although the Cinnamon Teal was moving among the Blue-winged Teals, it soon became obvious that he had a mate, as a

female teal was close ahead, behind or beside him almost constantly and the male Blue-wings were showing no interest in this female. I then contacted Fred Dunk, the local druggist, who also came and viewed the pair of Cinnamon Teals. For many years Fred had hunted and observed waterfowl in this area and in other parts of the province and he states that he has never before seen this species in Saskatchewan, although he has seen numbers of this western bird when visiting San Diego, California. *Birds of Regina* (1961) lists a number of sightings of Cinnamon Teal and the furthest north sighting, near Battleford in 1964, is given by H. C. Moulding (*Blue Jay*, 22:154).

Although there was very limited time for observation, the flock had few females. The flock was as follows: Blue-winged Teal, 15 male; Green-winged Teal, eight male, no females; Lesser Scaup, about 30 but apparently only about half a dozen females; Cinnamon Teal, one male and one female.