

(Jeff Lemons)



Rallidae the RAILS, GALLINULES, and COOTS

The Rallidae family is a very large family of birds estimated at 144 species spread worldwide. In general, they all have short, rounded wings, and they spend most of their time walking on the ground in heavily vegetated habitats like marshes or swimming in wetlands. Many types of rails in the Pacific are totally flightless, but other rails are strong fliers and migrate long distances.

This diverse family is represented in the Carolinas by a strange mix of birds: six “marsh hens” (rails), two duck-like gallinules, and one odd-looking “old coot.” Despite their outward differences in appearance, these birds are all considered to be closely related due to the similarity of the structure of their leg bones. Many birds in the family Rallidae are known for their periodic out-of-range wandering. Each of these nine birds can be found here in the Carolina Piedmont.

One of the biggest challenges for birders in the Piedmont is finding a rail. However, some of these birds are likely more common in our area than the number of our records indicate. Most are found in wet, dense habitat that is difficult to access, and these birds tend to be very hard to see or flush. They may pass entirely unobserved, right by your feet, as you are attempting to scare them out for a peek. One technique often used to determine if a rail is present is to stand at the edge of the wetland and play the bird’s call over a speaker. If a birder is lucky, a rail will respond to the recording.

Marsh hen hunters hunt rails along the coast of the Carolinas each year. “The tradition of rail hunting goes back to the 1800s, when it was considered a gentleman’s sport among the tobacco growers and plantation owners of the Coastal Plain.” Today, these rail hunters are a small (currently estimated at 500 in North Carolina) but dedicated group of sportsmen. They pole flat-bottomed boats into the marsh grasses at the time of the highest lunar tide so they can flush their quarry. When a bird is flushed, the hunter has a brief chance at a shot and, if successful, sends a trained dog into the water to retrieve the prey. Rail hunting is a great challenge, and the height of the tide is the key. If the tide isn’t high enough, the rails remain hidden and are almost impossible to flush.