

## Often Heard but Seldom Seen – The Secretive Rails of Beaverhill Lake

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Beaverhill Lake is used by wide variety of waterbird species, most obviously during migration when massive flocks of birds gather to feed and molt. However, not all of the lake's residents are quite so conspicuous. One group in particular migrates under the cover of darkness and is far more often heard than seen as they skulk through densely vegetated marshes. These are the rails, a group of waterbirds that are as fascinating as they are secretive.



*The Sora is Alberta's most plentiful rail species, yet they can still be extremely difficult to see!*

*Photo credit: Gerald Romanchuk*

Given how secretive they are, you may not be familiar with what a rail is. Rails are generally found in marshy, densely vegetated areas. Their skinny bodies allow them to squeeze through gaps in vegetation unnoticed – these birds truly are as thin as a rail! Long legs and extended toes allow the rails to walk across submerged vegetation while feeding on aquatic plants and invertebrates. A rail is superficially similar to a sandpiper in appearance and habits, but they have much shorter wings and prefer to forage in densely vegetated ponds instead of on open mudflats.

There are 3 species of rail found in Alberta, all of which breed in Beaverhill Lake. These are the Sora, the Virginia Rail, and the Yellow Rail. Sora are the most common species by far, easily located by their distinctive 'whinny' call in marshes across the entire province. The Virginia Rail and Yellow Rail are both more localized to the eastern half of Alberta, but occupy similar marshy habitats to those favoured by the Sora. The breeding call of the Virginia Rail is a series of abrupt and metallic 'tick-it' phrases given in quick succession, but they can give a wide range of other grunting vocalizations as well. The breeding call of the Yellow Rail, heard primarily at night, is a series of distinctive but easily overlooked ticking sounds reminiscent of two stones being tapped together.



*The Virginia Rail has a uniquely long and colorful bill compared to the other Alberta rails. Photo credit: Gerald Romanchuk*



*Of all the rails found in Alberta, Yellow Rails are by far the most secretive. Photo credit: Gerald Romanchuk.*

Given their secretive nature, it's no surprise that rails are not well studied and their population trends poorly understood. From what little information we do have, it is very clear that human-driven landscape changes are putting significant pressure on rail populations. The Alberta Wildlife Act designates the Sora as a sensitive species and notes that the loss of wetland habitat has resulted in Alberta's population declining by over 50% since 1994. The Yellow Rail is listed as a species of special

concern under the federal Species At Risk Act, but their exact population trends aren't known in many parts of the country. The same can be said for the Virginia Rail, while it has received no special designation the exact status of its populations are not known within Alberta. With wetland habitats being degraded or destroyed country-wide, it is reasonable to assume Yellow Rail and Virginia Rail populations are suffering similar declines to the Sora.

Given the declines of these species, what can be done to help? Because rails are generally understudied, more research into their populations and status is immensely valuable for informing recovery plans. This summer at the Beaverhill Bird Observatory staff will be conducting surveys of Lister Lake targeted towards these species to better document their presence in the area. An easy way that anyone can contribute to the conservation of rails is by documenting any rails you see or hear using citizen science programs such as eBird.

Preservation of wetland habitat is also key for the health and survival of Alberta's rails, as it is for the wide variety of other insects and animals that depend on them. If you are a landowner with suitable wetlands on your property, consider leaving them intact so that you can play an important part in protecting living things – both seen and unseen!

The plight of Alberta's rails goes to show that even the most inconspicuous of marsh birds is still dramatically affected by human activity. The next time you find yourself walking alongside a marsh, keep an ear out for these incredible and secretive birds. With enough patience and luck, you might even be able to see one wander past the edge of the cattails.