

THE YELLOW RAIL IN OKLAHOMA

BERLIN A. HECK AND W. DAVID ARBOUR

109 Kaye Drive Broken Bow, OK 74728 [baheck@pine-net.com](mailto:baheck@pine-net.com)

1462 Collin Raye Drive DeQueen, AR 71832 [incadove@ipa.net](mailto:incadove@ipa.net)

*Abstract*—We document the records of Yellow Rail (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) occurrences in Oklahoma since first recorded in 1842. Data from 6 years of surveys suggest that this rail is a regular migrant at Red Slough in McCurtain County.

The *Date Guide to the Occurrences of Birds in Oklahoma* (Oklahoma Bird Records Committee 2004) lists the occurrence of Yellow Rails (*Coturnicops noveboracensis*) in Oklahoma as rare, expected between 10 October and 29 November, but only in southern McCurtain County. Oklahoma's first Yellow Rail was collected 7 March 1842 by Lt. William Eustis near Fort Wayne, in Indian Territory, about 1.6 km south of the Missouri line, now Delaware County (Tomer 1959; Broadhead 1984). This specimen, a male, was placed in the United States National Museum (N. 12641) but now resides in the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History at the University of Oklahoma (SNOMNH 5361, skin).

The second Yellow Rail record for Oklahoma was by R. Graber, who reported one killed in early fall 1954 by a mowing machine in McClain County. The specimen was not saved, and G. Sutton stated about this report, "Record fairly convincing, but not quite valid." (Sutton 1982). D. Scott (1978) reported a Yellow Rail by a pond in Payne County, north of Stillwater 23 April 1975. Other Yellow Rail records reported in Baumgartner and Baumgartner (1992): 1 in Rogers County, 26–27 March 1969 by D. Goard, R. Cramer, and E. Delap and 1 in Washington County, sight record listed (Wood and Schnell 1984). William Carter (pers. comm. 2007) observed that the records for Rogers and Washington counties are the same. The error was a result of a report by Williams (1969) in *Audubon Field Notes* where the sighting was erroneously listed as Washington County. Sutton (1982) correctly reported it from Rogers County.

Each autumn from 1974 to 1984, James Norman (1987) gathered migratory bird kills under a television tower in Coweta, Wagoner County. Three Yellow Rails were collected during this period (all skeletons), which now reside in the Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History in Oklahoma City (SNOMNH 11137, 27 September 1976; SNOMNH 11220, 3 October 1976; SNOMNH 19617, 16 September 1982). In Cleveland County, 3 Yellow Rails were observed 30 March 1991 by Victoria Byre (pers. comm. 2007). On 9 April 1994, James Arterburn found a Yellow Rail on a sidewalk in downtown Tulsa, Tulsa County, apparently grounded by stormy weather conditions the previous night. He photographed it and released it in a nearby marsh (Arterburn 1997). Arterburn (pers. comm. 2006) found 2 other Yellow Rails in Tulsa, Tulsa County; on 20

October 1997, 1 Yellow Rail was found dead in downtown Tulsa, apparently having struck a building. The skin is in the Tulsa University Museum (TU 206, C. Brown. pers. comm.). The other Yellow Rail, found 9 April 1994, was standing in a roof gutter on a private home (Oklahoma Bird Records Committee 1994).

In 1998, about 2,430 ha of mostly open wetland habitat was procured by the U.S. Forest Service in southeastern McCurtain County within 3.5 km from the Red River and named Red Slough Wetland Management Area (Red Slough). The area was converted from production of rice and other grain crops to wildlife habitat with emphasis on waterfowl. Yellow Rails were first observed at Red Slough in autumn 2001 and have been observed every year since (Table 1). Observations have been made primarily by flushing Yellow Rails using a rope drag. Some of the Yellow Rails in Table 1 were almost certainly repeats from previous flushes, and the number of times a rail drag was made during the season and the duration of each effort were not consistent.

**Table 1.** Number of Yellow Rails observed at Red Slough Wildlife Management Area, 2001–2006

Year	January	October	November	December	Total
2001		27			27
2002		2	3		5
2003			4		4
2004	1	47	5	28	81
2005		11	5	4	20
2006		7			7
Total	1	94	17	32	144

Habitats preferred by Yellow Rails at Red Slough each autumn are typified by 2 grasses identified by Matt White (pers. comm. 2007); fall panicum (*Panicum dichotomiflorum*) and long-leaved rushgrass (*Sporobolus asper*). In September, these grasses die and fall over, creating a dense overstory about 30 cm high, which provides concealment and mobility for Yellow Rails. They are rarely found in areas with standing hard stems of dead plants such as saltmarsh aster (*Aster subulatus*), sumpweed (*Iva annua*), and ragweed (*Ambrosia* spp.), which are abundant in many moist fields at Red Slough. Red Slough is well situated along the migration corridor for Yellow Rails, and its attraction could be due partly to the fact that it offers the first suitable habitat available to them during autumn migration after a long flight over the Ozark and Ouachita mountains to the north.

Bookhout (1995:1) stated that the Yellow Rail “is extremely difficult to observe because, like other rails, it prefers to run or hide instead of flying and commonly moves beneath procumbent vegetation.” The difficulty of locating a Yellow Rail concealed in the grass has been obvious at Red Slough during rope drags for rails. On several occasions, when a Yellow Rail was flushed and its landing site was marked, up to 7 people attending the drag as observers immediately converged on the site, and being certain that the rail was within a 1.5 m diameter grassy area, carefully searched on hands and knees, but could never see the concealed rail until it flushed. Bookhout (1995:1) also stated that this rail “may be more abundant than encounters would indicate.” Based on the lack of any records in the Red Slough area before 2001 and the surprising numbers of Yellow Rails found during autumn migration surveys since we began searching for

them in 2001, we concur with this statement.

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