



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

King Rail *Rallus elegans*

State Status: **Threatened**
Federal Status: **None**

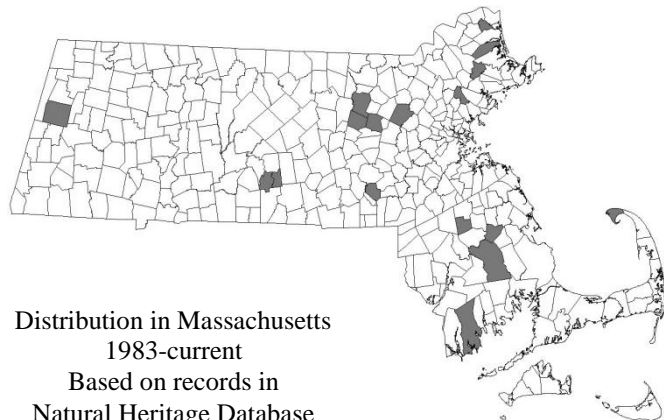
DESCRIPTION: The King Rail (or “Mud-Hen”) is the largest of the New England rails, measuring 15-19 inches with a wingspan of 21-25 inches. The King Rail has a plump body, similar to that of a chicken. Its long slender bill curves downward and varies in color from orange-red to dark brown. Upper parts of the King Rail are olive-brown, streaked with a brownish-black or olive gray. The wings are brown and its upper throat is whitish. Over each eye a brownish-white or brownish-orange line turns to brownish-gray behind the eye. The entire chest and sides of the neck are a deep reddish-brown. Male and female are similar in plumage; the male is slightly larger than the female. The call of the King Rail is described as a “jupe-jupe-jupe-jupe-jupe” with the tempo increasing and the volume decreasing as it calls.



Photo by Jim Rathert/MO Conservation

SIMILAR SPECIES IN MASSACHUSETTS: King and Clapper Rails have been found together in salt and brackish water marshes. They have similar plumage and have been known to hybridize where their ranges overlap. The Clapper Rail is smaller and grayer in color than the King Rail. The Clapper Rail also has paler flank barring. The call of the Clapper may also be more rapid than that of the King Rail.

RANGE: Massachusetts is at the northern edge of the King Rail’s range, and has most likely always been a rare and local breeder in the state. Overall, the King Rail breeds from the Gulf Coast to southern Ontario and from the Atlantic Coast to the Great Plains. It winters from the Delaware Valley to the southeastern portions of Florida and westward to the Gulf Coast and to Texas. Local occurrences in the state have occurred in Berkshire, Plymouth, Essex and Worcester counties.



HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS: King Rails nest in shallow water areas with emergent vegetation (cattails, grasses, and sedges), usually in large cattail marshes or extensive wet meadows.

LIFECYCLE/BEHAVIOR: Nesting in Massachusetts takes place primarily in June. Nests are typically placed on a sedge tussock just above the surface of the water. Nests are woven with cattails, sedges or other vegetation found in the marsh. Typically, in the north, one clutch is

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

1 Rabbit Hill Rd., Westborough, MA; tel: 508-389-6300; fax: 508-389-7890; www.mass.gov/dfw

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laid yearly with 10-12 eggs that are a glossy pale buff varying from cream-buff to pale olive-buff. Incubation of the eggs normally is from 21-23 days. The young are precocial and are able to walk around one hour after hatching. Diet of the King Rail consists mainly of crustaceans and aquatic insects.

POPULATION STATUS: The population seems somewhat stable in the southern United States, but its northern range is seeing a decrease in population that can partially be attributed to wetland habitat loss. The King Rail has most likely always been a local and rare breeder in Massachusetts, and is listed as a Threatened species in Massachusetts.

MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS:

Protection of important marsh habitat and maintaining this habitat free of invasive species (particularly *Phragmites*) is a key component of marshbird conservation. Maintaining a consistent water hydrology during the nesting season is important for the King Rail and other wetland nesting birds.

REFERENCES

- Fredrickson, L.H., B. Meanley, and F.A. Reid. 1994. King Rail. Pages 181-191 in T. C. Tacha and C.E. Braun, eds. *Migratory Shore and Upland Game Bird Management in North America*. International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, Washington, D.C.
- Meanley, B. 1992. King Rail. In *The Birds of North America*, No.3 (A. Poole, P. Stettenheim, and F. Gill, Eds.). Philadelphia: The Academy of Natural Sciences; Washington, D.C.: The American Ornithologists' Union.
- Meanley, B. 1969. Natural History of the King Rail. In *North American Fauna*, no.67. U.S. Dep. Inter. Bureau of Sport Fish and Wildlife.

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