

Water Rails at Kosi Tappu. (Rallus aquaticus)

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1990

Sighting no. 1. The evening of 25 February, about 5.30 or 6 p.m., at the same place where I later saw the Blue-breasted Banded Rail (*R. striatus*). There was a loud squealing and chattering in the reeds followed by a splash as a Water Rail jumped out of cover, walked a yard or two and then sneaked back into the reeds at a different point. Although I only saw one bird I had the impression that two Water Rails had just been squabbling. Possibly, in view of his rarity, he had been driven out of cover by a Rail of a different species. (The Blue-breasted Banded Rail?) The resident Ruddy Crakes (*Porzana fusca*) and Baillon's Crakes (*P. pusilla*) seem too small to drive the much larger Water Rail out of cover.

I recognised the bird's voice as one that I had heard in that place before. I had been watching that swamp since 15 February, but unfortunately have no record of what day I first heard the call. I believe it was a few days prior to the first sighting, rather than at the beginning of my visit.

Sighting no. 2. The same place, at about 8 a.m. or 8.30 a.m. on 26 February. This time the bird sneaked out of the reeds briefly without any signs of a dispute with other birds and I had a much clearer view of the plumage. (This was about half an hour before I saw the Spotted Crake.) It was a damp overcast day and the birds were more active than usual.

Sighting no. 3. The same swamp, in the early morning on 2 March. Unfortunately I haven't recorded details, only that I saw the bird.

Sighting no 4. The same swamp on 3 March. The Crakes and Rails seemed very active until about 7.30 a.m. I saw the Water Rail at least twice, but could not say whether it was the same bird or two different ones.

I have just had the chance to consult S. Dillon Ripley's monograph on the Rallidae and was struck by the plumage differences of the illustrated bird compared with my sketches. The bird depicted has an area of unstreaked brown on the wing covers as the main difference. My sketches, whenever I saw the bird clearly, show upperparts uniformly streaked light and dark brown. This colouration continues downwards onto the side of the breast, ending almost in a point with grey plumage on three sides. I have drawn the eyebrow, chin, face, throat, foreneck and breast as a uniform grey except for a fine dark line through the eye and a paler, more brownish grey in front of the flank stripes. The bill was red with a black

Water Rails at Kosi Tappu (cont.)

tip.

I am fairly confident of the accuracy of my sketches because I had at least four chances to improve on the first one. I'd like to know if this identifies the subspecies, or is an example of individual colouration that proves I saw only one bird five times.

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Speculations on whether there were two Water Rails
Present on 25 February, or not.

Something made the Water Rail jump out of the reeds, while the Ruddy Crakes carried on feeding and sneaking in and out of the reeds unconcerned. There didn't seem enough disturbance for a predator to be hunting; even the Water Rail didn't appear to be fleeing for his life. I wonder, on second thoughts, if an immature Blue-breasted Banded Rail could make a rather larger adult Water Rail give ground, since I am sure I saw the "loser" of the squabble. If the "winner" was a coot or moorhen or even a bird of another family such as a heron, I feel sure I would have seen him, because it happened so close to where I was sitting and I got quite used to staying so still, in camouflage clothes, that most birds ignored me. The only skulker I saw on that swamp who was larger than a Water Rail was a Eurasian Bittern and he preferred the much taller reeds on the far side of the swamp. This particular reedbed, although dense enough for little crakes and rails, wasn't tall enough to hide a Bittern. Also I only heard the Water Rail and no other species.

If Water Rails normally leapt squawking out of reedbeds towards the observer for no particular reason, then people would see them more frequently. Unless you can think of another reason for the bird's behaviour (predatory fish, perhaps) it seems to indicate that he had just been driven out by another Water Rail.

I realise, of course, that one of the bird's usual calls is a terrible din that sounds like a fight even when it isn't.