

First documented record of Black Rail *Laterallus jamaicensis* in Honduras

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Black Rail *Laterallus jamaicensis* occurs very locally from southern Canada to Chile and Argentina, but is best known in the southern USA (Ripley 1977, Eddleman *et al.* 1994, Taylor & van Perlo 1998) and is considered Near Threatened (IUCN 2013). Rare and poorly known in Central America, where breeding has been reported only in Panama (Harty 1964) and all records are from near sea level, except in Guatemala, where there are undated historical specimens from the highlands (1,450 m) at San Miguel Dueñas, dpto. Sacatepéquez (Salvin 1866, Salvin & Godman 1879–1904). There are no subsequent records in the country (Eisermann & Avendaño 2007; K. Eisermann *in litt.* 2013). In Belize, Black Rail was first reported by Russell (1966) based on two specimens taken on 29 June 1963 in north-east Toledo (*c.* 27 km north-west of Monkey River). Additional records from Toledo, mentioned by Howell *et al.* (1992), are from 27–29 June 1992, and by Jones (2003, eBird 2013), on 9 November 2002. ACV (pers obs.) detected a singing Black Rail in southern Orange Walk district on 20 April 1998, and M. O'Brien reported hearing one on 12 March 2005 in

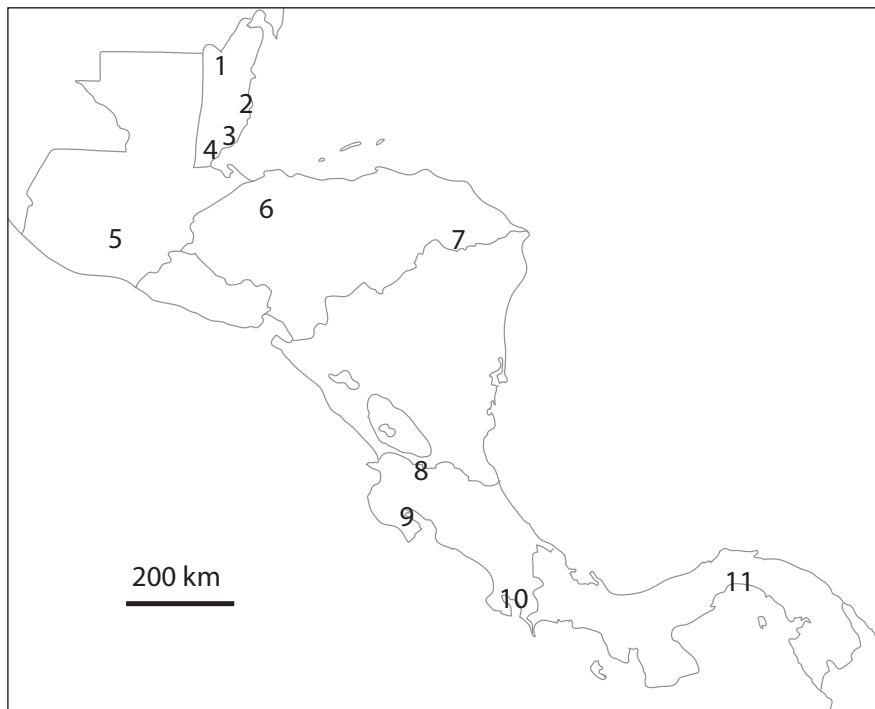


Figure 1. Map showing Central American reports of Black Rail *Laterallus jamaicensis*: (1) Orange Walk district, Belize, (2) Stann Creek district, Belize, (3) northern Toledo district, Belize, (4) southern Toledo district, Belize, (5) San Miguel Dueñas, dpto. Sacatepéquez, Guatemala, (6) La Pimienta, dpto. Cortés, Honduras, (7) Mabita, dpto. Gracias a Dios, Honduras, (8) Medio Queso, Puntarenas, Costa Rica, (9) Taboga, Guanacaste province, Costa Rica, (10) Puntarenas province, Costa Rica, (11) Tocumen, Panamá province, Panama.



Figure 2 (left). Habitat of Black Rail *Laterallus jamaicensis*, Mabita, dpto. Gracias a Dios, Honduras, 25 June 2013 (Andrew C. Vallely)

Figure 3 (right). Adult Black Rail *Laterallus jamaicensis*, Mabita, dpto. Gracias a Dios, Honduras, 24 June 2013 (Andrew C. Vallely)

Stann Creek district (eBird 2013). Monroe (1968) mentioned sight records on 10 March 1953 near La Pimienta (75 m) on the río Ulúa, dpto. Cortés, in western Honduras, but lacking a voucher or other evidence he considered the species of 'doubtful occurrence' in the country. This area has undergone agricultural intensification and it is unknown if suitable habitat remains. The species has not been reported in Nicaragua (Martínez-Sánchez 2007, Martínez-Sánchez & Will 2010). In Costa Rica it is known from sight records on the Pacific slope on 6–9 July 1966, 3 September 1966 and 19 June 1967 at Taboga, Guanacaste (Orians & Paulson 1969) and on the Peninsula de Osa at Rancho Quemado, Puntarenas (Stiles & Skutch 1989). On the Caribbean slope it has been reported from the río Frío area at Medio Queso, Alajuela, near the Nicaraguan border (Stiles & Skutch 1989). Central American records are from both the boreal winter and summer, and the species is potentially resident, but breeding has been documented only in Panama, where a nest was found at Tocumen, Panamá province (Harty 1964), the only record in the country (G. Angehr *in litt.* 2013). Central American records are mapped in Fig. 1.

On the afternoon of 18 June 2013, RJG heard the distinctive three-syllable call of *L. jamaicensis* in an extensive (>100 ha) area of partially flooded grassland bordered by pine (*Pinus caribaea*) woodland (Fig. 2) near Mabita, dpto. Gracias a Dios, in eastern Honduras (14°33'15"N, 84°26'49"W; Fig. 1). RJG alerted ACV and other members of the field party, and we both obtained brief but diagnostic views of a rail as it ran on the ground and later flushed displaying fine whitish speckling on the dorsal surface and a rufous neck patch. On 24 June 2013 we returned to Mabita and obtained photographs of an adult captured by local residents (Fig. 3) c.1 km from the sighting on 18 June. The grass understorey was sparse and low (<15 cm). Small areas of exposed soil were visible. Some areas held shallow, standing water. Local informants explained that the area has undergone recent and frequent burning to improve grazing for cattle, although none was present at the time of our visit. Other species included Fork-tailed Flycatcher *Tyrannus savanna*, Grasshopper Sparrow *Ammodramus savannarum*, Botteri's Sparrow *Peucaea botterii* and Eastern Meadowlark *Sturnella magna*.

Our observations represent not only the first documented records of Black Rail in Honduras but also fill a large distributional gap. The extent of grassland and pine woodland in the Honduran Mosquitia (c.6,000 km²; Meyers *et al.* 2006) suggests that there is considerable available habitat in the region, but systematic surveys are needed to

estimate population size, abundance and seasonal status. Because Black Rail is thought to be declining in the north of its range (Eddleman *et al.* 1994, IUCN 2013), its presence in the sparsely settled Honduran Moskitia may afford a valuable conservation opportunity. Surveys in ecologically similar areas of adjacent Nicaragua are also needed to further clarify the species' range and status.

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