

Most are secretive birds of wetlands and are rarely seen except when attracted by taped calls. Plumage is usually a pattern of black, white, brown and chestnut. Immatures are duller. Sexes alike. Body is narrow, for slipping through dense vegetation. Long unwebbed toes spread their weight. The short tail flicks as they walk. Bill stout and dagger-like in rails, shorter in crakes. Fly reluctantly when disturbed but are capable of sustained flight, mainly at night.

MARSH CRAKE (Koitareke) *Porzana pusilla*

Locally common native

18 cm, 40 g. Tiny slim secretive rail. Like a miniature Banded Rail, but upperparts cinnamon brown *streaked* black and white. Sides of head and underparts blue-grey; flanks, abdomen and undertail are black barred white. Bill, legs and feet greenish; eye red. Juvenile barred brown and buff on underparts, pale buff on cheeks and throat. Readily walks on duckweed and other floating vegetation. Call a harsh 'krek', like a fingernail being drawn along a comb. **Habitat:** Dense beds of reeds and rushes in freshwater and estuarine wetlands. **Breeding:** Oct-Jan. [Sp 160]



RAILS, GALLINULES and COOTS Rallidae

About 140 species, of which 8 breed in New Zealand. Midden evidence shows that 8 other endemic species became extinct between the arrival of Maori, and European settlement, and the Chatham Island Rail *Rallus modestus* became extinct in about 1900. Two other species are vagrants to New Zealand, and a Corncrake *Crex crex* was reputedly killed near Nelson in 1865, but this record has not been officially accepted.

The rails are mainly aquatic birds, all capable of swimming well. In New Zealand, they range in size from the small Marsh Crake to the large flightless Takahe. Apart from the Pukeko and Weka, rails and crakes are secretive birds, usually skulking in freshwater swamps, and estuarine mangroves and reedbeds. On some mammal-free islands, however, they live on the forest floor. Rails have slim bodies that help them move through dense vegetation, moderately long powerful legs with long unwebbed toes that help them walk in wetlands, a short tail, which is flicked up and down as they walk or swim, and short broad wings. Apart from the flightless Weka and Takahe, rails have low, laboured flight by day, but at night they fly

higher and show good ability to colonise isolated islands. Island forms tend to become flightless.

The two species of gallinule breeding in New Zealand, the Takahe and the Pukeko, are believed to represent two invasions from Australia of the cosmopolitan Purple Swamp-hen *Porphyrio porphyrio*; the Takahe arrived several million years ago, and the Pukeko much more recently. Typical of ancient New Zealand birds, the Takahe has become larger and flightless.

The gallinules and coots have a bony frontal shield extending from the bill to cover the forehead. The legs of coots are quite short, and the toes have lobes of skin that help them swim.

Most species nest solitarily, but Pukeko form groups and several females can lay in the same nest. The cup-shaped nest is generally well concealed in dense swamp vegetation or among *Carex* clumps; however, coots construct an exposed floating platform attached to raupo or rushes. The downy young are capable of walking, running and swimming within days of hatching.

Reading: Ripley, S.D. 1977. *Rails of the World*. Toronto: M.F. Feheley.

160. MARSH CRAKE *Porzana pusilla*

Plate 36

Other names: Koitareke, Ballion's Crake

Size: 18 cm, 40 g

Geographical variation: Five subspecies; three in Africa, Europe and Asia to Irian Jaya, *palustris* in Papua New Guinea, Australia and Tasmania, and *affinis* in New Zealand.

Distribution: Breed throughout the Old World from Africa and Europe across Asia to Australasia. In New Zealand, they are scattered sparsely in raupo swamps of the North, South and Stewart Islands, but are also in saltmarsh habitats and high-altitude wetlands of the South Island. They were in the Chatham Islands in the early 1900s, but none has been seen recently.

Marsh Crakes are secretive and rarely seen, many records are of cat-killed birds being brought to houses, or from duck-shooters who have seen crakes lurking near their maimai. They are apparently quite mobile, probably flying at night, judging from occasional records of birds found at lighthouses or in towns, far from their usual habitats.

Population: Locally common in some saltmarsh habitats, such as on the southern side of Farewell Spit, and generally more common than Spotless Crakes in the South Island.

Conservation: Protected native. The drainage of many lowland wetlands and introduced mammalian predators have undoubtedly had a major impact on Marsh Crakes, but because of their very secretive nature, they are probably more common than the number of records suggest.

Breeding: Little information is available from New Zealand, as few nests have been found. Pairs apparently remain on territory all year. They lay in October-December, 5-6-7 olive-brown eggs (28 x 20 mm) in a shallow dished platform made of short lengths of rushes or sedge. The nest is usually 30-40 cm above the water beside the pedestal of a *Carex* and with a hood of dead *Carex* tillers to protect the nest from the elements. Unlike the Spotless Crake, nests are generally not in dense raupo stands. Both sexes incubate for 16-20 days. The chicks are initially covered with black down and have yellow bills.

Behaviour: Little is known, as Marsh Crakes are extremely shy and cryptic, and live in dense vegetation. By day, they are more silent than Spotless Crakes and seldom respond to taped calls; however, they occasionally respond aggressively to taped calls of Spotless Crakes. At dusk and at night, they have a variety of calls, that most often heard being a harsh trill 'krek', like the sound of a fingernail being drawn along a comb.

Feeding: Diet is a mixture of invertebrates and seeds of aquatic plants. In swamps, they rarely come into the open, but sometimes feed on muddy margins of swamps or in tidal runnels in saltmarshes.

Reading: Barlow, M. & Sutton, R.R. 1975. *Notornis* 22: 178-180. Elliott, G. 1989. *Notornis* 36: 117-123. Kaufmann, G. 1987. *Notornis* 34: 207-216. Kaufmann, G. & Lavers, R. 1987. *Notornis* 34: 193-205.