

A Tale of Yellow Rails

“Yellow Rail at Red Slough!”

The subject heading in the e-mail was irresistible, as Yellow Rail is one of North America’s most elusive birds and because few birders have seen the species. Smaller than a quail, the Yellow Rail breeds in wet marshy areas in the northern United States and Canada and spends the winter along the Gulf Coast. Therefore they must migrate regularly through Oklahoma and Texas. So how come they are almost never seen there during migration?

The reason, some have suggested, is that Yellow Rails behave more like small mammals than like birds, almost never flushing. Despite the odds, the famous ornithologist George Miksch Sutton, in his *Birds of Oklahoma*, suggested that birders in the southern Great Plains search for Yellow Rails from early October through mid-May in marshy places and “low-lying dry fields well away from water”. There have been a few how-lucky-can-you-get sightings, such as the man a few years ago in Tulsa who was cleaning his gutters and found one walking around on his roof, or the rail near Fort Worth that was found poking about in an urban garage. A few Yellow Rails have been found dead, including 13 that flew into a TV tower while migrating at night over Dallas County in 1960, and stories persist about Yellow Rails cut to pieces by people mowing their pastures. And so it seemed that one would just have to get lucky, very lucky, to see the species alive during migration.

Matt White

882 Highway 50

Campbell, Texas 75422

mwhite@parisjc.edu

Thus, it was with a great deal of interest that I read David Arbour’s e-mail message indicating that he had flushed 13 Yellow Rails from a dry grassy marsh at Red Slough, a large wetland complex managed by the U. S. Forest Service in the Red River bottomlands of southeast-

ern Oklahoma. A couple of days earlier he had reported a single bird, and while that alone is enough to make envious birders turn green, *thirteen* was simply off the charts. Nobody ever finds

Yellow Rails here in the double digits. Although I very seldom chase rare birds anymore, I was suddenly beginning to feel a strong urge to make the two-hour drive to Red Slough.

I had felt that way the year before, and the year before, and even the year before that when David first began finding Yellow Rails at Red Slough, but I never could seem to find the time, and besides, I reasoned, I would probably jinx the endeavor. As with many other birders, David’s first encounter with the species was serendipitous. While mowing one of the wetland units in early October 2001 he flushed five birds from the rank grasses. Over the next two-and-a-half weeks he found several more, but always fewer than a handful. For each of the following years he had had four more birds. So when I read that there were so many birds, I began making plans to go the following Sunday and join a field trip that David was leading.

An early phone call from my friend Randy Treadway the next day, however, changed my plans. Randy had gotten a rare four-day weekend and was fishing for somewhere to go birding for the day. “Let’s go to Red Slough,” I suggested.

I figured contacting David on such short notice would be pointless, so I was quite surprised when I found him at home at 9 a.m. on a Friday. You’d be hard pressed to find a more generous birder; still, I could tell I was testing his generosity. David had been showing Yellow Rails to birders from several states for the past few days and was looking forward to a quiet day at home to rest and get caught up.

“Well, I guess I could just run over there for a few minutes—we would only need to see a couple. The problem is my rope drag is in Broken Bow, and if I run by there to get it, it will take me an hour and 15 minutes.” But he added, “It will only take me an hour if I just come straight over there.”

“Only an hour,” I thought to myself. Now I was feeling thoroughly uncomfortable because I didn’t want to inconvenience him.

“Let me call Berlin and see if he wants to come



It is hard enough just to catch a glimpse of a Yellow Rail sneaking through dense vegetation. Seeing one in flight—and photographing it, no less—is a special challenge. *Red Slough, Oklahoma; 21 October 2004. © Matt White.*

because he lives in Broken Bow and could bring the rope,” he suggested. Berlin Heck is one of southeastern Oklahoma’s most active birders and his posts to the Oklahoma bird listserv written “from the frontier” are always interesting and often downright funny.

“Tell him I would like to meet him,” I offered.

We had arranged a time to meet before I mentioned to David that one of my primary goals for the day, besides seeing the birds and learning about their habitat, was to attempt to get flight shots of these birds as they flushed from the grasses. Having recently purchased William Burt’s *Rare and Elusive Birds*, I knew that obtaining photographs on par with his would be out of the question. Burt calls the Yellow Rail “a miracle of stealth and secrecy, if any creature is”. I also knew that most likely I would not even be able to get a photograph of the bird on the ground, but what if I could get a shot or two of the bird *in flight*?

I could tell that my aspirations made an impression on David.

“We need some good photos for our website,” he piped up.



It was almost noon before Randy and I turned down Mudline Road and into Red Slough. Located in the Red River

valley, a broad, immensely flat plain, Red Slough is reminiscent of Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas coast. Grassy and marshy wetlands stretch off in all directions and the Earth is so flat, it is almost intimidating. When we reached the middle parking lot—our meeting place—we found almost enough birders waiting on us to fill the positions on a baseball field. Besides Berlin and his adult son, and a good friend, there was Terry, the Red Slough wildlife technician, and four ladies from nearby Idabel, Oklahoma, whom David had run into and invited to join us.

David, it seemed, had rolled out the red carpet for our trip to Red Slough. Not only had he gone and picked up the rope, he had also loaded the Kawasaki Mule and a four-wheeler to allow us to cover more ground in our search for these unforthcoming birds. Dragging a rope is very tiring, he explained, and what he intended to do was tie one end of the rope to the four-wheeler and the other to the mule and slowly work our way across the grassy field, pulling the rope between them. The rope was about thirty feet long and had short sections of rope every five or six feet with small water bottles full of rocks tied to them. The idea is to cause the rails to jump up over the rope before it passes over them.

When we reached the field, a dry grassy field not unlike many I have seen other places, David paused for a few

minutes to play tour leader and to explain what to look for and what else we might see, including Sora and Virginia Rail. He also explained that today he was going to search in a different area from those he had recently visited.

Venturing into the tall grass (in places higher than our knees), we were instantly swallowed up by the enormity of the field. The little thirty-foot-long rope was bowed out like a seine as we slowly headed out in search of Yellow Rails. It occurred to me that we would be able to sample only a small fraction of this place. At once Sedge Wrens began popping up—not every now and then but constantly. There were simply too many to count. Before we had gone fifty yards, a Sora flew up and then into the deep grass to live the rest of its life in seclusion.

As a confirmed stalker of marshes and wetlands, I have seen my share of Soras. They used to excite me, which is not to say that I don't appreciate them anymore; it is just that most of the Soras that I have seen have come when I was really, really trying to find a Yellow Rail. I recall one encounter with a young Sora about a decade ago that

made me get momentarily excited. It was a buffy bird with a narrow white secondary bar. Yellow Rail, I thought, and then realized that it was just another Sora.

A few paces and up popped a Virginia Rail that was visible for about six seconds and then disappeared, probably forever. In that short time frame, we could see its rusty flanks and long, narrow, decurved bill.

What happened next is what motivates birders, what drives them to conquer continents and span oceans in a never-ending quest to see birds. I will be the first to admit that seeing rare birds, waifs far out of range, is an adrenaline-pumping experience, but seeing birds where they are supposed to be, in their natural habitat, is just as exciting, and almost always more instructive. We had barely begun searching when, without warning, a dark-winged bird with immaculate white secondaries emerged from the dun-colored grass and fluttered off, landing a few yards away. I was stunned. The bird was so easy to see and so easy to identify. My lifer had been over a decade ago on what is known as the Yellow Rail Prairie at

Note that the legs on this flushing Yellow Rail do not trail behind the bird's body—the way one usually sees it depicted in field guides. Flying Yellow Rails have been so rarely photographed that there exists incomplete or inaccurate information in the basic identification literature on the species. *Red Slough, Oklahoma; 21 October 2004. © Matt White.*



Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge on the Texas coast. But it had been a long time ago, I hadn't gotten very good looks, and besides I had forgotten how bright white appeared those secondaries. I had forgotten how beautiful they are. A few more feet and there was another, then another. It was too easy. How had I missed them all these years?

In all likelihood these birds had never been seen by anyone, and probably never will be again. They are under far less danger from a few birders who seek to understand their habitats and migratory status than they are from the ever-expanding network of cell towers that are thrown up in their way. I make this distinction because one year David received an e-mail from someone who claimed that dragging a rope across this habitat was severely disturbing the birds and that any benefit to be gained for science was simply not worth the disturbance to the birds. One also wonders how many birds are cut to pieces each year by rice combines and mowing operations.

Although seeing Yellow Rails flushing right in front of

you proved to be easy at Red Slough, photographing them was anything but easy. To say it was a challenge would be to miss the mark by a wide margin. Indeed, there are apparently very few published photographs of flying Yellow Rails. Although we ended up flushing sixteen Yellow Rails in this manner—a mark that pleased David because it was his one-day high total for Red Slough—not a one of us saw them all. There were simply too many birds. In addition to Yellow Rails, there were 21 Soras, 6 Virginia Rails, 1 King Rail, 1 American Bittern, dozens of *Ammodramus* sparrows (including two Henslow's Sparrows), and *hundreds* of Sedge Wrens.

I did my best to keep the camera pointed toward the rope and then rapidly aim, focus, and shoot as the birds headed off in all directions. The first bird that I actually tried to photograph was diving back into the tall grass before I managed to shoot the image. The next time I did a bit better, capturing the bird with its wings in a V-shape milliseconds before it too disappeared from humanity forever. This was going to be harder than I thought. At least,

Habitat of the Yellow Rail (note flushing bird, center) at Red Slough Wildlife Management Area in southeastern Oklahoma. The blond-colored grass is fall panicum (*Panicum dichotomiflorum*), a native annual grass typically found in moist lowlands with disturbed soils. *Red Slough, Oklahoma; 21 October 2004.* © Matt White.



I reasoned, I could document the species. After about a half dozen or so attempts I finally managed to photograph a bird at close range as it passed right beside me—just before it performed its Olympic high dive and slipped back into cover without so much as a ripple. I missed a chance to photograph a bird that rose about eight or ten feet in the air, and then for a few seconds performed a kiting maneuver before continuing onward.

After four hours of taking images of flying Yellow Rails (and a few other birds as well), I found that my batteries were running low. I managed to get a handful of images that are quite instructive, a few that are really good, and of course some that were completely useless. Careful study of the photographs, however, revealed something very interesting. Recent field guides depict flying Yellow Rails with their legs extending well beyond the tail, or even dangling well beneath it. On none of the birds that we flushed did we observe this behavior, and, indeed, the images confirmed that the Yellow Rail's legs are tucked under the tail with the toes just barely protruding past the tail.

After about two miles of walking through the dense grass, Randy decided to ride in the back of the mule. From that high vantage point, he watched in amazement as a Yellow Rail walked away from the rope, never flushing. The fact that he saw the bird is astonishing because the birds are the color of the yellow grasses in which they hide. Several times we tried to find a bird when we saw the exact position in which it had landed—all unsuccessfully. William Burt was right: This is a bird that “just melts away”.



So what is it that makes Red Slough so conducive to Yellow Rails? Although we were on dry ground the entire day, these large units are designed as wetlands to mimic natural flooding patterns. They do not stand in deep water all year. The result is a beautiful mix of wetland grasses, forbs, and even weedy species that probably closely matches the original composition that for eons Yellow Rails have used during migration. David had noticed that the Yellow Rails seem especially fond of a blond, thigh-high grass known as fall panicum (*Panicum dichotomiflorum*), and, in fact, we had better success at flushing them from areas that were largely covered with that grass.

So just how many birds were actually present? The truth is that there were probably hundreds of them. Red Slough contains several thousand acres, although not all of them are managed in this manner. Still, the figure could be staggering. We were able to survey only a small fragment of the fields we searched—an analogy akin to running an electric shaver across a football field.

After months with little rainfall, fall is normally dry across much of the southern Great Plains. These wetland units are recharged in winter when rains come, but are then drained during the late winter, allowing them to become bone dry by summer. Sutton never saw the species in Oklahoma. In fact, the only record from the state he was even aware of—when he penned *Birds of Oklahoma* in 1967—is of a bird that was collected in March of 1842! Nonetheless, it is a testament to his skill and talent that he actually predicted where and when they should be found in Oklahoma.

