

Recent observations of the Rusty-flanked Crake *Laterallus levraudi*

Peter Boesman

Laterallus levraudi es una especie amenazada, endémica del noroeste y centro-norte de Venezuela, cuya historia natural es poco conocida. Observaciones recientes (1995–1996) en Carabobo (cuatro sitios) y el este de Falcon (tres sitios) sugieren que la especie es más común de lo que se creía previamente, y se conoce una población de c. 40–100 parejas en estos sitios. Se estima que el total de la población puede ser bastante mayor. Se describen algunos aspectos de su comportamiento, ecología y conservación. Basados en la similitud de las vocalizaciones y las áreas de distribución aparentemente alopátricas se propone un complejo superespecífico que incluye *levraudi*, *melanophaius*, *albigularis* y *ruber*. De la evidencia de los especímenes y las observaciones del autor la temporada de cría parece comenzar en mayo–julio. Sus preferencias específicas de hábitat permanecen como un enigma; observaciones preliminares sugieren que la especie prefiere pequeños estanques en llanuras o terrenos ondulados, que a menudo contienen un denso borde de vegetación acuática inalterada. Sólo un sitio se encuentra formalmente protegido; se requiere urgentemente la conservación de todos los sitios conocidos para la especie y relevamientos que identifiquen nuevas áreas.

Introduction

Rusty-flanked Crake *Laterallus levraudi* is one of many little-known Neotropical crakes but has one of the smallest distributional ranges. Together with a paucity of records during recent decades, this ensured its categorisation as Vulnerable⁶. Of all crakes, the genus *Laterallus* is the least studied¹⁰. *L. levraudi* was previously considered endemic to the area from Yaracuy and Carabobo to north-east Miranda, north-central Venezuela⁸, an area studied extensively by ornithologists and birders alike. Nevertheless, *L. levraudi* is virtually unknown in life, its distribution derived from 10 specimens in the Phelps Collection, all taken prior to 1947 and field observations from three sites^{5,6}. In the last decade, its presence has been confirmed at only one site: a small man-made pool in Yacambú National Park, Lara, where it is still present (e.g. recently recorded on 4 July 1996, PB).

Recent observations

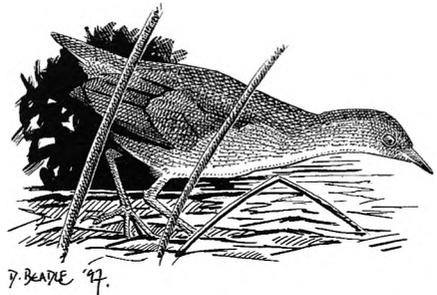
During 1995–1996, Rusty-flanked Crake was observed at the following new localities (see map).

Guataparo Lake, west of Valencia, Carabobo (at 510 m)

Heard twice in May 1995 (PB). In the morning of 13 July 1996 a survey was performed by boat of the western border of the lake. Birds were heard at six locations (Alfredo Terzenbach, Chris Cade and PB). Population estimate: 10–20 pairs.

Pond east of Bejuma, Carabobo (at 600 m)

Heard late afternoon of 17 June 1996 (PB). Population estimate: 1–3 pairs.



Rusty-flanked Crake *Laterallus levraudi* (David Beadle)

Pools at the border of Canoabo dam, Carabobo (at 250 m)

Heard and taped on 7 July 1996 (Leila Kurbage, Norbert Flauger and PB). Population estimate: 2–6 pairs.

San Pablo marsh, Carabobo (at sea-level)

Heard, taped and photographed on 21 June, 21 and 27 July 1996 (Leila Kurbage and PB). At least 6 pairs were heard at different locations. Population estimate: 10–30 pairs.

Hacienda La Coreanera west of Sanare, east Falcón (at sea-level)

Heard, taped and seen on 24 June 1996 (Leila Kurbage and PB). At least four pairs present. Population estimate: 5–10 pairs.

Tacarigua Dam, east Falcón (at sea-level)

Heard, taped and seen (two birds) on 23 June 1996 (Leila Kurbage and PB). Population estimate: 5–20 pairs.

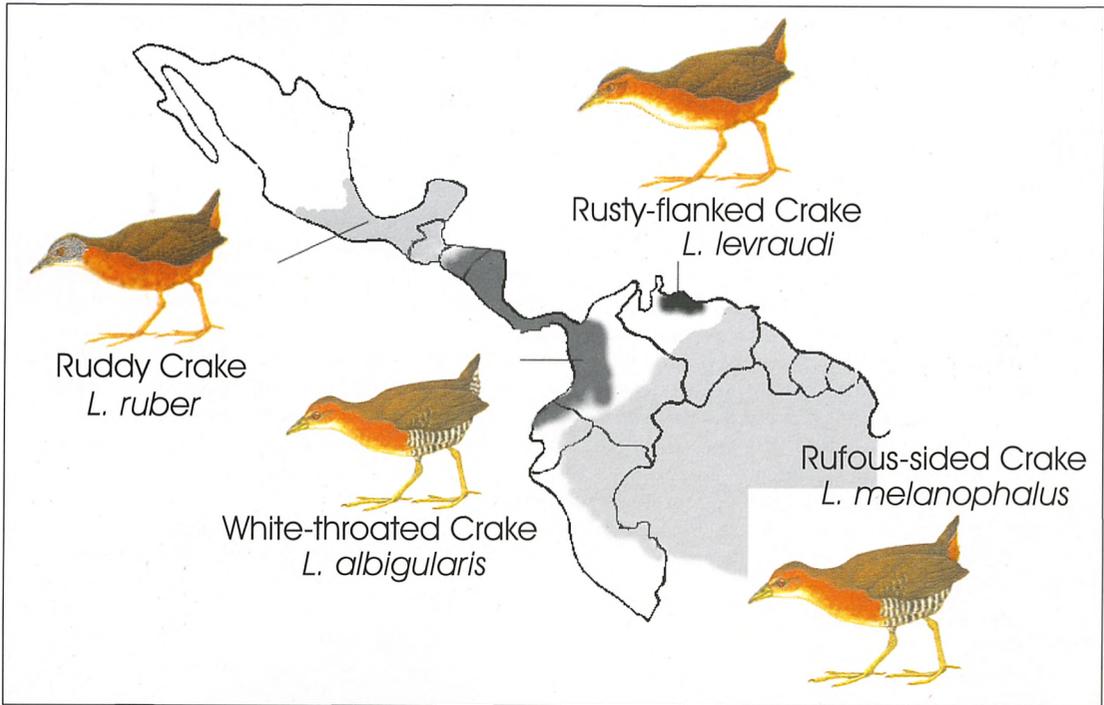


Figure 1. Distribution of *Laterallus* crakes with similar vocalisations and appearance in the northern Neotropics



Rusty-flanked Crane *Laterallus levraudi* (Peter Boesman)

Ponds in Serranía Mision, south of Sanare, east Falcón (at 100 m)

Recorded in 1995 (Alfredo Tellez and Howard Laidlaw). In July 1996 this pond was drained, but birds were heard and taped at two different ponds in the same area (PB). Population estimate: 2–5 pairs.

Behaviour and ecology

During surveys in June–July 1996, birds were very vocal, unlike most landbirds which are nesting at this time of year. At most localities mentioned above, birds were calling from dawn to c.10h00 and again from 16h00 until dusk, usually with intervals of 10 minutes to one hour. When using play-back, vocal response was normally immediate, and when birds were lured out of vegetation, there were always two together, possibly pairs. Once, there were 3–4 birds together. It was unclear whether this was a family party or two pairs reacting to the tape. Usually birds stayed within dense vegetation and went unseen, even at very close range, the typical descending rattle being the only evidence of their presence. The only juvenile in the Phelps Collection was captured on 6 September 1946 at Valencia Lake. This may indicate

that the species is especially vocal at the start of the breeding season (May–July) and that young fledge in August–September.

Rusty-flanked Crake inhabits lakes, lagoons, swamps, flooded pastures and occasionally dry grassland to 600 m⁸. This appears very general, as almost any aquatic habitat corresponds to this description, but is in fact correct. However, much depends on the vegetation of these habitats. We noted a preference for two specific habitats.

1. Small ponds in hilly country, with forested slopes bordering at least part of the pool or in the immediate vicinity and being at least partially bordered with reeds and grasses (e.g. ponds in Yacambú, near Bejuma and in Serranía Mision).
2. Lakes, pools or marshes in more open country with rich or very dense aquatic vegetation, not subject to cattle or human disturbance (e.g. Lake Guataparo, San Pablo marsh, Tacarigua Dam, Canoabo Dam).

Other species apparently preferring this habitat and observed in several places included Least Grebe *Podiceps dominicus* (which although usually silent has a rather similar vocalisation), Least *Ixobrychus exilis* and Stripe-backed Bittern *I. involucris* (both relatively uncommon in Venezuela), Masked Duck *Oxyura dominica*, Caribbean Coot *Fulica caribaea* and Black-capped Donacobius *Donacobius atricapillus*. For a more complete list of the bird-species occurring in these general areas see^{2,3,4,7}.

Even so, it is currently impossible to explain why *L. levraudi* is confined to aquatic habitats in the (lower western parts of the) Cordillera de la Costa and adjacent Caribbean lowlands, being apparently absent from the extensive Llanos wetlands. Further investigation is required to more fully establish this species' habitat requirements.

Identification and voice

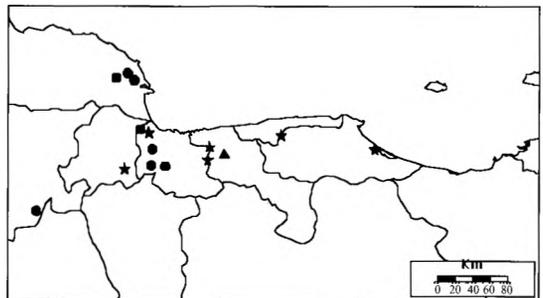
Identification is straightforward, this being the only Neotropical crake which is rusty-brown with a whitish breast and upper belly (without barring on the flanks or undertail coverts: see photographs). Typically birds are initially located by voice, a descending churring rattle of 3–5 seconds, preceded by gradually accelerating notes only audible at close quarters. When excited, the rattle can last several more seconds, rising and falling several times. Although similar to several other *Laterallus* species, subtle differences are apparent, e.g. being higher-pitched than *L. melanophaius*. Birds apparently do not respond to play-back of

the latter species. A superspecies-complex may be involved, as several *Laterallus* have similar vocalisations and apparently allopatric distributions. Plumage varies in having more or less rufous or white, and barring on the flanks and undertail coverts. Figure 1 illustrates *Laterallus*-species in the northern Neotropics. This superspecies-complex was recognised by Storer¹¹, but voice was not included as a common feature. There has been little agreement over which species belong to the genus *Laterallus* and what their inter-generic relationships are^{1,9,10}. The members of this superspecies-complex have never been questioned but the superspecies-complex with allopatric distributions is mentioned here as further proof that birds can be identified in the field by voice alone.

Conservation

In view of these new records, this species' conservation prospects appear less dire than previously considered. Healthy populations are known from at least three sites (Guataparo Lake, San Pablo marsh and the Sanare area), and the species apparently survives at small ponds where it is easily overlooked. The current survey was limited and it is to be expected that several other small sites where the species occurs will be identified.

The population is c.35–94 pairs at the known sites, and the total population could be several times this figure. *L. levraudi* is perhaps locally common in suitable habitat. There is, however, no reason to be too optimistic. As in many countries, aquatic habitats are under serious pressure, and potential threats are numerous. There are plans to increase the water level of Lake Guataparo, inundating the birds' habitat; the new borders would be near human settlements where new aquatic vegetation is unlikely to develop. The pond in Yacambú, a popular picnic-site for tourists from Barquisimeto, was 'cleaned' in 1994, which led to



Map. Distribution of Rusty-flanked Crake *Laterallus levraudi*
Key: ● = records from 1990 onwards; ★ = records before 1950; ▲ = records between 1950–1989

the disappearance of the formerly common Masked Duck. A pond in Serranía Mision was 'cleaned' and converted to a drinking pool for cattle, causing the crake's disappearance. Agriculture and deforestation is advancing around Canoabo dam, threatening the small pools. None of the present sites is safe, and except for Yacambú none has received formal protection. It is clear that the species' survival requires at least some important wetlands to remain unaltered. Further investigation may discover additional populations, but effective protection of Guataparo Lake, Tacarigua Dam and Canoabo dam against human development for agriculture, coupled with a guaranteed constant water level, is a priority (and would benefit the water quality of these important reservoirs which are used for human consumption). San Pablo marsh with its unique avifauna (see Boesman⁹) would be best managed as a wildlife refuge.

Other key areas for the species are mentioned in Wege & Long¹², but at most sites the continued presence of the species requires confirmation. In the future, investigation is needed of areas in Yaracuy, which has seen less human population expansion than Carabobo and Aragua; the species is expected to occur at several other sites. May to August is the period for surveys, due to the distinctive voice and apparent absence of other *Laterallus* species at these localities. Observers are encouraged to explore new areas in order to discover more about this interesting species.

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