# SAVING THE EASTERN BLACK RAIL: AN URGENT CONSERVATION CHALLENGE

### Eastern Black Rail

The Eastern Black Rail (*Laterallus jamaicensis jamaicensis*) is one of the most elusive secretive marsh birds, and is now one of the rarest of all wetland birds in North America. Hiding in the densest marsh grasses, the mouse-sized and often nocturnal birds are found in salt, brackish and freshwater marshes only deep enough to wet the bottom of a boot. In the United States, the largest breeding population of Eastern Black Rails was found along the Gulf Coast and Midwest-Great Plains.

#### **Conservation Status**

Since the 1990s, Eastern Black Rail populations have declined by more than 90% in their Atlantic Coast range. They have disappeared from many historical strongholds and the Atlantic Coast breeding range has retreated south by more than 280 miles (from Massachusetts to New Jersey). This rapid decline (~ 9% annually) and the Black Rail's shrinking range has triggered a petition for federal listing. The Black Rail was also adopted by the Atlantic Coast Joint Venture (ACJV) as one of its three flagship species to focus collective conservation attention.

#### **Drivers of Decline**

Eastern Black Rail populations historically suffered from the widespread conversion and alteration of wetland habitat. Scientists believe that recent precipitous declines are being driven by sea-level rise and nest inundation from higher tidal flooding. Black Rails are ground nesters and even small increases in preferred water levels appear to prevent breeding activity. Meanwhile, numerous states (from NC through New England) are experiencing rates of sea-level rise three times the global average.

## **Population Objectives**

The most recent population estimate for Black Rails within the ACJV is 355-815 pairs. Our goal is to restore a sustainable population of Black Rails in the ACJV. To achieve this we have set the following objectives:

For more information:

Aimee\_Weldon@fws.gov

- By 2024: Stabilize the population above 300 pairs to prevent additional loss of genetic diversity in at least four population centers (NJ, NC, SC and FL) that currently support the greatest abundance of breeding Black Rails.
- 2. By 2056: Grow the population to 2,500 pairs across at least five population centers in current and historical locations.



#### Achieving our Objective

Eastern Black Rail habitat requirements are a subtle mix of factors no longer common--or readily available-in many places. In both tidal and non-tidal wetlands, they appear to prefer shallow water, dense vegetation, abundant invertebrates and seeds, some slope, and often an element of sheet flow. It is critical that partners rapidly restore degraded wetlands and/or develop managed or created wetlands with suitable conditions (perennial shallow water, with dense herbaceous vegetation) in salt and freshwater habitats, in order to achieve our population objectives.

Priority actions will vary from site to site but we must begin testing them now. Actions include the use of water control structures to maintain appropriate vegetation and water depth in impounded wetlands, prescribed fire to set back woody vegetation, creation of artificial freshwater sloped wetlands or wet meadows, use of dredge spoil or other materials that provide higher nesting areas in tidal marshes, and control of invasive plants in high marsh habitat.

Population declines are steep but there are reasons for optimism. Black Rails have large clutch sizes and there is evidence that they can produce second and replacement clutches, suggesting that if population constraints were removed, population growth could be rapid. Likewise, they are not restricted to salt marsh habitat. Suitable conditions can be created inland, away from the threat of sea level rise. With swift action by partners across the range, we have the opportunity to turn a conservation crisis into a conservation success story.

Population statistics taken from: Watts, B. D. 2016. Status and distribution of the eastern Black Rail along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts of North America. The Center for Conservation Biology Technical Report Series, CCBTR-16-09. College of William and Mary/ Virginia Commonwealth University, Williamsburg, VA. 148 pp.