

## Corte Madera Creek's Most Threatened Bird

1996

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The evening heat diminished, leaving a breath of dampness and a cool, gentle breeze. The marsh was still except for a kite fluttering high above the pickleweed and the seep of tide washing over parched, cracked, salt-caked earth. That's when I heard the distinctive clatter of my first clapper rail.

"The California clapper rail, one of three sub-species of clapper rail found in California, formerly nested in tidal marshes from Humboldt County to San Luis Obispo County. A short, compact bird with a tawny brown breast, flanks striped with white, a dappled back and a patch of white under the tail, it slips quietly through the cordgrass and pickleweed marshes" of Creekside Park in Kentfield "searching in the mud for a meal of clams, mussels and crabs. Although these birds are most often observed during flood tides when they are forced out of their marshland cover," I had never caught even a glimpse of this elusive feathered friend.



*California clapper rail in Muzzi Marsh*

"This bird requires dense stands of vegetation in the lower marsh, where it nests and hides from predators, as well as upper marsh areas which it uses as retreats during high tides. Over 85 percent of the tidal marsh in the Bay Area that once provided habitat for clapper rails has been destroyed. It has been diked and filled and turned into marinas, airports, garbage dumps, housing tracts, industrial parks and salt ponds. During the winter months nearly the entire population of California clapper rails is found in only eight marshes around San Francisco Bay. Almost everywhere, levees now separate the remaining tidal marsh from the rails historic high marsh retreat areas, which now underlie shoreline development. With no easy access to cover during high tides, the normally secretive rails become vulnerable to predators such as northern harriers (hawks).

Clapper rails have been hunted by European settlers since the 1700s. They were so abundant at the turn of the century that hunters boasted of shooting two hundred in a day, and San Francisco restaurants hung strings of rails in their windows. But by 1987 California clapper rails were confined to San Francisco Bay—more than 90 percent of them in the south bay—and the entire population was estimated at only seven hundred birds. In 1989 the total population was estimated to be fewer than five hundred birds."

Like the canary in the coal mine the clapper rail is an indicator of environmental quality and is responding to the continued degradation of San Francisco Bay and the creeks that drain into it. "With less than five hundred individuals remaining, there is little certainty that this bird will survive for another twenty years." Diminished numbers make it essential that we protect the rail by taking the following steps:

- Keep your dogs on a leash when walking
- Pick up after your pets to maintain good water quality
- Keep cats inside
- Properly dispose of garden clippings away from the creek by composting, or using green cans for yard waste pickup
- Protect bushy native plants on uplands adjacent to marshes

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