

Marsh Madness

SECRETIVE SPECIES DRIVE BIRDERS CRAZY

ARTICLE BY MICHAEL J. BUDD

The least bittern, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service species of concern, may be the toughest bird to view in most wetlands.
Photo by Joe Mac Hudspeth Jr.

THOSE WHO LISTEN
CLOSELY TO A MARSH
DISCOVER A NEW WORLD.
HIDDEN IN THE CATTAILS
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BLEND IN SO WELL THEY ARE
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King rail by Joe Mac Hudspeth Jr.

The population of the king rail, probably the rarest of Arkansas breeding marsh birds, has declined sharply.

Most bird enthusiasts won't see these birds without focused efforts. The majority of birders spend days hoping for a quick glimpse of these elusive creatures, only to be stumped. It may take hours to see a camouflaged bird, though it may be heard calling from a few yards away.

Most of these secretive marsh birds belong to two families: bitterns and rails. And most are in critical peril in the United States – listed as federal species of concern or as endangered by states.

Arkansas is home to four species of concern: king rail, least bittern, common moorhen and purple gallinule. Several other species in this group migrate or winter in Arkansas: sora, Virginia rail and American bittern. Some birders may be lucky enough to find a yellow rail or black rail, the smallest and most difficult rails to see.

Birders who perch on marshes in March and April likely will find these species near one another. Although birders might not see them, they are there – those who listen closely may hear coos and calls emanating throughout the marsh.

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Rare King

The population of the king rail, probably the rarest of Arkansas breeding marsh birds, has declined sharply. Brooke Meanley, who conducted research in the Stuttgart area in the 1950s, reported that the king rail was common and could be found nesting in rice fields and associated ditches. Finding a breeding king rail in Stuttgart is almost unheard of today.

King rails took advantage of irrigation ditches lined with rushes and cattails for cover and nesting in the past. Adults moved broods from ditches into rice fields, where adults fed on crayfish and the young consumed insects. Adults also used rice as nesting material and, quite often, rails built nests in rice fields. These likely were secondary nests since first nests were built in mid-April before rice is suitable for nesting. King rails still may nest in rice fields in Arkansas. They're commonly found in Louisiana rice fields but research in the last two years hasn't documented this in Arkansas.



purple gallinule



least bittern



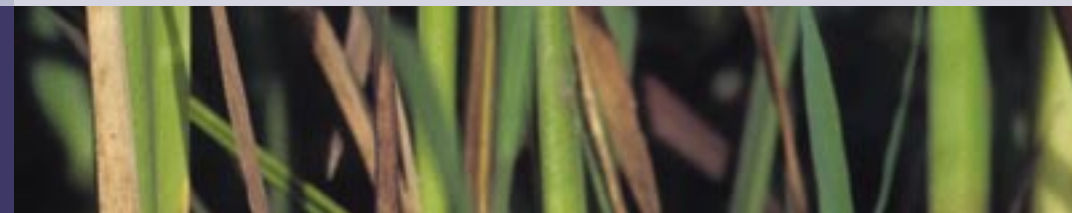
virginia rail

Photos by Michael Budd.

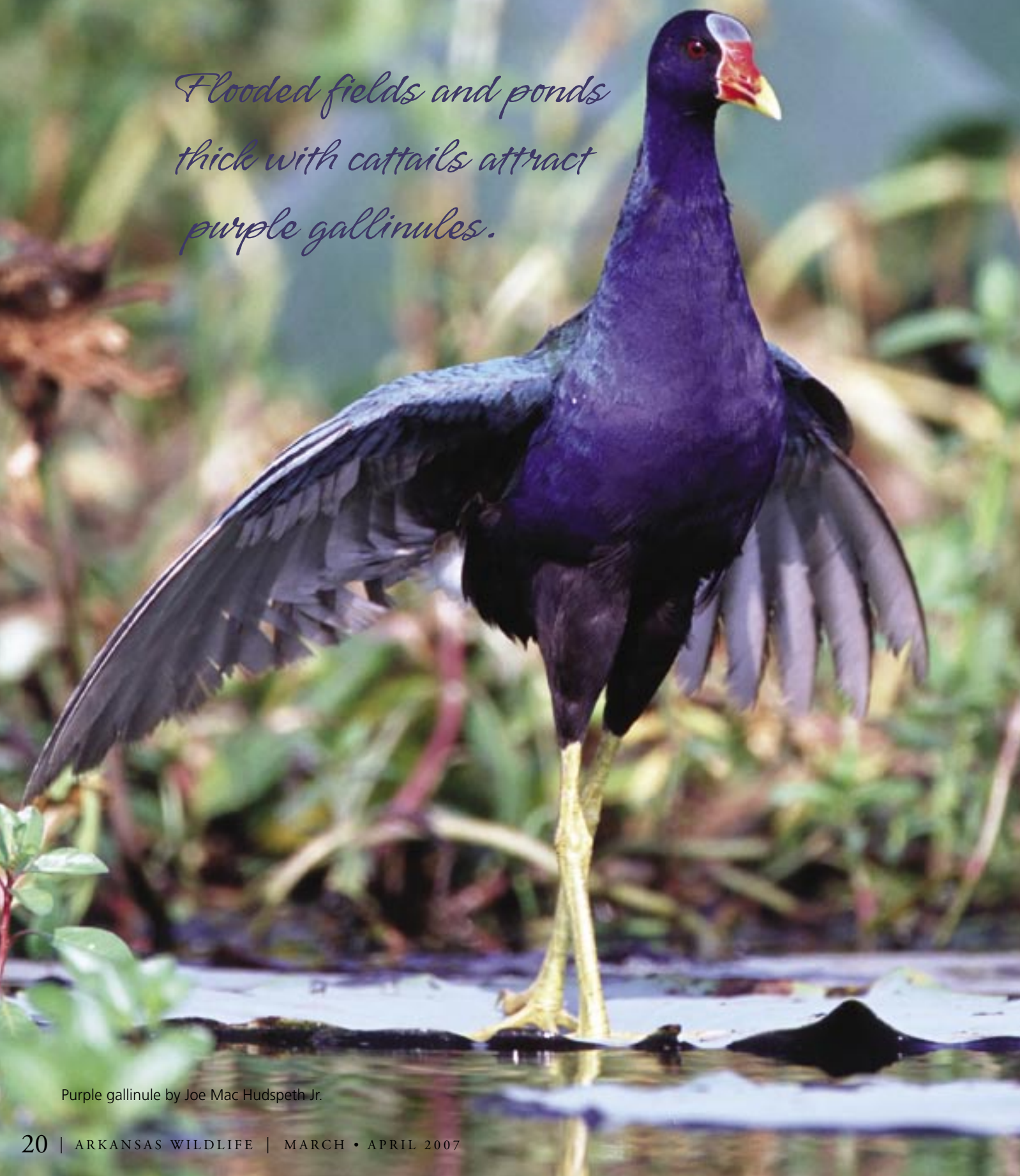
Where Is It?

The least bittern, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service species of concern, may be the toughest bird to view in most wetlands. Its cryptic color and behavior allow it to disappear before a birder can point it out to other observers. This bird can be as close as 5 yards and still be lost in vegetation, calling with a soft coo.

Startled bitterns stretch their necks toward the sky. This behavior is a desperate attempt to blend in with vegetation around them. Sometimes these birds stretch out in full view, which can be a humorous situation since they believe they're invisible.



Flooded fields and ponds thick with cattails attract purple gallinules.



Purple gallinule by Joe Mac Hudspeth Jr.

Nowhere to Hide

Changes in agricultural practices since the 1950s have had adverse effects on all marsh birds. The clearing of ditches is a good example.

Most ditches are kept clean of vegetation with burning or dredging to allow efficient water supply for irrigation. Steep slopes of ditches further slow establishment of plants. Mowing the edges of fields may be another negative practice because rails use tall grasses for cover to move from ditches to other areas.

With or without changes in agriculture, there is no doubt that the biggest impact on marsh birds has been the destruction and loss of wetlands. Ninety percent of the historic wetlands in Arkansas have been drained or altered for agriculture and aquaculture. The Mississippi Delta, where agriculture dominates the landscape, has endured the greatest loss of wetlands compared with other inland states and, consequentially, the greatest loss in bird diversity.

Wetlands dominated by cattails and rushes in Arkansas are as rare as the birds themselves. Many wetland areas in Arkansas are managed to benefit waterfowl. Secretive marsh birds must rely on areas that have fallen out of rotation as prime waterfowl habitat and left alone for several years until rushes or cattails become established.


Habitats that benefit marsh birds the most often are not desirable for land managers and farmers. Stands of cattails and rushes are aggressive, have low value to waterfowl and present water-control problems for farmers. Cattails and rushes tend to create dense monotypic stands of low value to most birds. But if they are properly managed by water control or fire, these wetland plants can provide hot spots for marsh birds.

Creating Havens

The most likely places to find marsh birds are Wetland Reserve Program properties, managed under the Natural Resources Conservation Service, and national wildlife refuges.

WRP easements have created habitat for marsh birds because of their complex design. Easements with wetlands containing cattails and rushes have brought significant improvement to marsh bird habitat, according to recent research funded by the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission. The same is true for USFWS refuges. Overflow National Wildlife Refuge in Ashley County has held king rails and least bitterns for the last several years because of its diverse wetland habitats.

Tune your ears to cattails next time you're duck hunting or spying birds at a marsh. You will be amazed by what you may have missed. You may catch a glimpse of these elusive birds and have an experience to share. If you simply enjoy bird watching, spend some time along a cattail marsh and you are likely to add a few more species to your life list – species few birders have had the opportunity to see.

For more information about marsh birds, contact Michael Budd at mbudd@uark.edu or visit the Arkansas Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit Web site, <http://biology.uark.edu/Coop/home/coophome.htm>. 



common moorhen



sora



king rail

Photos by Michael Budd.