

Still a mystery: the enigmatic Colombian Crake

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Colombian Crake is one of South America's greatest avian mysteries—a Neotropical species rarely seen alive, let alone photographed.

There are four recognized species of the rallid genus *Mustelirallus*. Among them, Zapata Rail *M. cerverai* (Critically Endangered) is undoubtedly the rarest and most poorly known; indeed, its very survival remains uncertain. With just four observations in eBird and no photographs at all, the species has definitely taken on mythical status. Colombian Crake *M. colombianus* (Data Deficient) comes a close second, with only 10 records on eBird (ebird.org). And although we do know that this crake is still out there, its natural history remains almost as mysterious as that of Zapata Rail.

Colombian Crake has had a rather fluid taxonomic history—shifting between the genera *Porzana* and *Neocrex*, before being placed in *Mustelirallus*. At present, two subspecies are recognized, with *M. c. ripleyi* in Panama and adjacent northwest Colombia, and the slightly paler nominate *M. c. colombianus* from Caribbean

northern Colombia south along the Pacific coast to Ecuador (Taylor & van Perlo 1998). Moreover, Hellmayr & Conover (1942) considered it conspecific with Paint-billed Crake *M. erythrops*. Even today some believe that Colombian Crake is not a valid species (e.g., Taylor & Sharpe 2020), but merely a morph or an immature plumage stage of Paint-billed Crake.

Taylor & van Perlo (1998) noted that very little was known about the status and distribution of Colombian Crake, emphasizing the urgent need for studies of its natural history. Nearly three decades later, the species remains poorly known. In this short note, we provide updated information on its distribution and habitat by summarizing more recent records, and share photographs of live individuals. We also discuss identification field marks, taxonomic considerations and possible novel insights into its natural history.



1 Colombian Crake
Mustelirallus colombianus,
Humedal La Segua, Manabí,
Ecuador, March 2025
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