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Shadowbirds, a Quest for Rails by William Burt

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REVIEW

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Shadowbirds, A Quest for Rails—William Burt, 1994. New York, Lyons & Burford, 172 p.—This book, the author's first, relates in somewhat overly-crafted prose, many of his experiences in searching out and photographing rails. His stories of finding, and not finding, Black and Yellow rails are the main threads to Mr. Burt's book. Interspersed are essays about the natural history of other North American rails and about two late-19th century oologists, Judge John N. Clark and Reverend P. B. Peabody. Chapters dealing with Black Rails occupy 41 pages, while 94 pages address his adventures with Yellow Rails. Mr. Burt is a professional photographer and his excellent photographs are a highlight of the book. His photograph of a Black Rail on its nest, peering out with fiery red eyes, is the best photo of this species I have ever seen. Among other photographs that I found especially pleasing were the Virginia Rail on nest and the singing Sedge Wren.

This book is written in the genre of popular natural history. It will appeal vastly more to birders with a background in the humanities, rather than in science, or engineering for that matter. Rails are "awkward, and undeveloped looking creatures" that are "proglers in places of mud and shadow." The night air is "heavy, sweet with honey-suckle: rounded tops of loblolly pine stand dark against a moon-bright sky." One marsh "is hellish in the light of day...endless, pointless, lifeless." The Black Rail is a "magician" and "wizard." The Yellow Rail "threads its way through grass with the fluency of a snake." I think these quotes give you a taste of Mr. Burt's prose. There are a number of interesting stories in the book, perhaps the best of which are Mr. Burt's search for the "Big Coulee" in North Dakota where Reverend Peabody was successful in finding a number of Yellow Rail nests, and the disappearance of Peabody's 5,000 page manuscript, *Nesting Ways of North American Birds*. Mr. Burt located Peabody's effects in a museum in Kansas, but only the index and endword of the manuscript were among them.

As far as Florida is concerned, there is little of specific interest to be found, as in his rail adventures Mr. Burt seems to have seldom strayed below the Mason-Dixon line. His stories do seem to support the possibility that Black Rails along the mid-Atlantic coast are much more strictly nocturnal than the species is in Florida. He states "Not once in all my slogging daylight hours have I glimpsed anything, ever, that could have been a black rail." I have been told by a well-known rail researcher from Maryland that he has never heard nor seen the species except at night, and that it is almost pointless to search for them during nights with bright moonlight. The habits of this species in Florida seem much different. It is not uncommon to hear calling birds during the daylight hours and I have, on numerous occasions, flushed them during the day. It also seems likely that this species sometimes may roost through the night in Florida (M. Legare, pers. comm.).

Notice that I have not mentioned the word "science" so far in this review. Do not expect to find any significant scientific insights in this book. In fact, Mr. Burt is very clearly not fond of modern science and he declares a "perversity" concerning it. He asks "how chill is reasoning that sacrifices wild, rare, living birds to the gain of nothing more inspired than data," and he decries "the arid scientese of ornithology usual today." His scorn also falls on a number of other subjects. Among these are the National Wildlife Refuges that are "just open-air museums. Or cageless zoos...;" resort beaches with "gaudy young girls [that] parade in the street in colored bunches, like balloons...;" and cruising teen-agers who are "automotive yahoos...flaccid, formless characters."

Should you add this book to your collection, or even bother reading it? Probably not, unless you have a special interest in rails or bird-related literature. If you fall into either of these two categories you will find the book a good read.—**Noel Wamer**, 502 East Georgia St., Tallahassee, Florida 32303.