

# COOTS, RAILS AND CRAKES

## Order RALLIFORMES

THIS group contains the coots, rails, crakes, and a somewhat abnormal form, the finfoot, or *itek ayer*, and is represented in the Malay Peninsula by some thirteen species, of which I have selected three for description in this volume.

All the birds of the order are of aquatic or semi-aquatic habits, living in swamps or amongst the dense and reedy vegetation bordering rivers and streams. They are of very skulking habits, difficult to flush, and running with great speed when disturbed amongst the thick herbage they frequent.

The characters are varied, but the legs are always long, with the toes slender, sometimes webbed or lobed. The bill is variable, but is generally sharply pointed, while a horny frontal shield is sometimes present. Wing, in most forms, short and rounded, denoting feeble powers of flight. Eggs, usually four or more, spotted and blotched; young, hatched covered with down, usually black in colour, and able to run immediately.

### KEY TO THE SPECIES HERE DESCRIBED

- |   |   |  |                                    |
|---|---|--|------------------------------------|
| 1 | { | Plumage streaked above . . . . .           | <i>Hypotænidia striata</i> , p. 15 |
|   | { | Plumage uniform . . . . .                  | 2                                  |
|   | { | Bill expanded at base above; plumage slate | } <i>Amaurornis phænicura</i>      |
|   | { | and white                                  |                                    |
| 2 | { | Bill not expanded at base above; plumage   | } <i>Rallina fasciata</i> , p. 18  |
|   | { | brown and rufous . . . . .                 |                                    |

### *Hypotænidia striata*

#### The Blue-breasted Banded Rail

*Rallus striatus*, Linn., *Syst. Nat.*, i., 1766, p. 262 (Philippines).

*Rallus gularis*, Horsf., *Trans. Linn. Soc.*, xiii., 1822, p. 196 (Java).

*Rallus albiventer*, Swains, *Animals in Menag.*, 1837, p. 337.

*Hypotænidia striata*, Hume and Marshall, *Game Birds Ind.*, ii., 1879, p. 245, pl. 43, fig. 2; Kelham, *Ibis*, 1882, p. 189; Oates, in Hume's *Nests and Eggs Ind. Birds* (2nd ed.), iii., 1890, p. 399; Sharpe, *Cat. Birds*,

*Brit. Mus.*, xxiii., 1894, p. 33; Blanford, *Faun. Brit. Ind., Birds*, iv., 1898, p. 160.

**Malay Name.**—Sintar : noh noo-deng (*Siamese*).

**Description.**—*Adult male.*—Head, nape and neck, ruddy chestnut, the head streaked with black, rest of upper surface, blackish brown, the feathers broadly edged with yellowish olive, and with broken bars or spots of white; wing coverts like the back, but the white bars broader and continuous. Primaries and secondaries and primary coverts dark brown, narrowly and irregularly barred with white. Under wing coverts and axillaries, fuscous brown, barred with white. Tail, very dark brown, narrowly barred with white. Beneath, throat, whitish, sides of the head and breast, ashy grey, darkest on the sides of the head. Middle of the abdomen whitish, the bases of the feathers black, sides of the body, flanks and under tail coverts barred with dark brown and white.

*Adult female.*—Similar to the male, but the chestnut of the head and nape duller, and the white bars of the flanks tinged with fulvous.

*Immature.*—With hardly any trace of rufous chestnut on the head, centres of the feathers of the back browner. White markings on upper surface less conspicuous, and tinged with fulvous.

*Nestling.*—The nestling is clothed in sooty black down, greyer beneath, the flanks inconspicuously barred with dirty-white.

**Soft Parts.**—Iris, red; basal half of bill, rose-pink, the anterior half, horn-colour; legs and toes, deep olive-brown (Oates).

**Dimensions.**—*Male*: total length, 9·2 in.; wing, 4·5 in.; tail, 1·75 in.; tarsus, 1·4 in.; bill from gape, 1·4 in.

**Range in the Malay Peninsula.**—Probably everywhere from north to south, and in the larger adjacent islands.

**Extralimital Range.**—Ranging from India, throughout Southern Asia, Formosa and the Philippines, and the Malay Archipelago as far as Celebes.

In different parts of its extensive range this widespread bird has received different names. The original bird (*striata*) came from the Philippines, that from Java was subsequently named *gularis*, and that from India, *albiventer*. All the forms are extremely closely allied, and, pending a critical examination of the whole group, I have left the Malayan bird under the oldest name, *striata*. The question is complicated by the fact that during October to March the resident population is augmented by migrants from the north certainly, and possibly from the south also.

**Nidification.**—The breeding season in Malaya is from May onwards, and the nest is a pad of grass placed among long grass and other vegetation, usually near water. A clutch taken in October, five in number, are pale stone-colour, with purplish-brown blotches and spots, mostly congregated near the larger end, and some appearing beneath the surface. The surface is chalky, without lustre, and the measurements are about 1·4 by 1 in.

**Habits.**—This water-rail is not very commonly observed in the Malay Peninsula, but is probably fairly abundant. The chief localities affected are swamps and abandoned mining areas, where the bird lives and breeds in the

thick vegetation surrounding excavations that have become filled with water. It is occasionally flushed in the early morning from the spoil pits adjoining roads and railways, and flies for a short distance, with a laboured fluttering action, before taking cover again.

One lived for some time in a ditch in my garden in Kuala Lumpur, emerging about five P.M., and running about with its head down and tail pointing upwards. I hardly ever heard it utter a sound, except a very occasional harsh croak.

*Amaurornis phœnicura chinensis*

**The White-breasted Water-Hen**

*Fulica chinensis*, Boddaert, *Tabl. Pl. enl.*, 1783, p. 54 (*Hongkong*, Stresemann).

*Erythra phœnicura*, Kelham, *Ibis*, 1882, p. 188; id. *Journ. Straits Branch Royal Asiat. Soc.*, No. 16, 1884, p. 192; Oates, in Hume's *Nests and Eggs Indian Birds* (2nd ed.), iii., 1890, p. 391.

*Amaurornis phœnicura* (part.), Blanford, *Faun. Brit. Ind., Birds*, iv., 1898, p. 173; Oates, *Cat. Birds' Eggs, Brit. Mus.*, i., 1901, p. 121, pl. ix., fig. 5.

*Amaurornis phœnicura chinensis*, Stresemann, *Nov. Zool.*, xx., 1913, p. 304; Herbert, *Journ. Siam. Soc., Nat. Hist. Suppl.*, vi., 1926, p. 341.

**Malay Name.**—Ayam-ayam, burong uwak-uwak: nok kuark (*Siamese*).

**Description.**—Above, slaty grey, below, white; under tail coverts, chestnut; upper mandible expanded on the forehead into a narrow frontal shield.

*Adult male.*—General colour above, slaty grey, slightly tinted with olive-green, lower back, rump and upper tail coverts, earthy brown. Primaries and secondaries, brownish black, paler on the outer webs, the outer web of the outer primary, white. Under wing coverts and axillaries, slaty, narrowly tipped with white, edge of wing, white. Forehead, superciliaries, sides of the face and the greater part of the under surface, white; sides of the breast and body, slate-grey, separated by a narrow black line from the white of the under parts, the black feathers white on their inner webs. Lower flanks, sides of the rump and under tail coverts, cinnamon-chestnut, thighs, white, with a faint rufous wash; middle of the abdomen with a fulvescent tinge. Tail feathers dark umber-brown.

*Adult female.*—Similar to the male in colour, but rather smaller.

*Immature.*—Whole upper surface more brownish, extending over the forehead; chestnut of the flanks and under tail coverts paler, and the white of the face and under surface, with dusky tips to the feathers.

**Soft Parts.**—Iris, red, chocolate or dark sienna-brown; bill, sea-green, greenish olive or greenish yellow, orange or crimson on culmen, and at base of mandible; feet, wax-yellow, yellow with a gamboge tinge, or yellowish brown.

**Dimensions.**—*Male*: total length, 13 in.; wing, 6.5 in.; tail, 3 in.; tarsus, 2.1 in.; bill from gape, 1.45 in. *Female*: total length, 12.2 in.; wing, 6.1 in.; tail, 2.8 in.; tarsus, 2 in.; bill from gape, 1.35 in.

**Range in the Malay Peninsula.**—Throughout the Peninsula nearly to its

southern limit, and all the adjacent islands, with the doubtful exception of Singapore.

**Extralimital Range.**—India, the Indo-Chinese countries, to Hainan, Formosa and South China. Ceylon, Indo-Malayan and Philippine birds and those from the lesser Sunda Islands and Celebes are all considered by Stresemann to be slightly different from the mainland birds and from each other. Sumatran, Javan and Bornean birds can certainly be distinguished from those inhabiting the Malay Peninsula, except the extreme southern extremity and Singapore Island, which are possibly identical with the Sumatran birds, and should be called *A. ph. javanica* (Horsf.). They can be separated by their smaller size and purer grey coloration above.

**Nidification.**—Not on record from the Malay Peninsula. From Pegu the nest is described by Oates as being a platform of dead and green leaves, resting on a few twigs and placed in trees, not less than fifteen feet from the ground. The eggs are from four to eight in number, and are almost without gloss, pale buff, covered profusely with spots and small dashes of reddish brown on the surface, and paler ones of the same colour sunk into the shell. The average dimensions are given as 1.51 by 1.16 in.

In the Peninsula the breeding season will probably prove to be from September to April.

**Habits.**—Quite the commonest rail in the country, and much less shy and skulking in its habits than most of the other species. It is found abundantly along the edges of rivers and watercourses, and in the thick vegetation at the edges of ricefields. It does not, however, spread into jungle country, even in the region of swamps. When disturbed it runs like the common moorhen, with its tail uplifted, and when pressed to flight rises almost vertically, with an obvious effort, and settles again after a very short distance. It does not swim so much, or dive so well, as the moorhen. The food appears to be seeds and rice, as well as small shells, worms, etc., and it is easy to keep in captivity. The call is a loud croaking cry, well expressed by the vernacular name, *uwak-uwak*, and heard in the early morning and evening, and often long after dark. Like *Rallina*, this rail is migratory and has been found on One Fathom Bank Lighthouse, the Aroa Islands between the lighthouse and the Sumatran Coast, and on Pulau Jarak, some twenty-five miles west of the Sembilan Islands. These birds are the larger form described above, and not the smaller *A. ph. javanica*, which is presumably resident where found.

### *Rallina fasciata*

#### The Malay Banded Crake

*Rallus fasciatus*, Raffles, *Trans. Linn. Soc.*, xiii., 1822, p. 328 (Sumatra).

*Rallina fasciata*, Schleg., *Mus. Pays Bas, Ralli*, 1865, p. 19; Hume and Marshall, *Game Birds Ind.*, ii., 1879, p. 235, cum tab.; Kelham, *Ibis*, 1882, p. 190; id. *Journ. Straits Branch Roy. Asiat. Soc.*, No. 12, 1884, p. 192; Blanford, *Faun. Brit. Ind., Birds*, iv., 1898, p. 169.

**Malay Names.**—Sintar merah ; sintar api.

**Description.**—Bill shorter and stouter than the preceding, the anterior half of the lower mandible deflected upwards. Wing, soft and rounded, secondaries about equal in length to inner primaries.

*Adult male.*—Head and neck all round, throat and chest, ruddy chestnut, paler on the throat ; remaining upper parts, sienna-brown, darker on the rump and upper tail coverts ; wing coverts, barred black and buffy white, the inner ones washed with the colour of the back. Primaries and outer secondaries, brown, barred with white, tinged with buff on the outer aspect of the wing, pure white on the inner aspect ; inner secondaries and scapulars like the back ; under wing coverts and axillaries barred black and white ; tail like the back. Under parts below the breast, broadly banded with black and white, the black bars widest ; under tail coverts similar, often stained with rufous, thighs mingled black and white.

*Adult female.*—The red of head and neck less chestnut, more cinnamon, and the black bars on the belly and flanks less wide.

*Immature.*—Head, neck and chest, brown, with a purplish flush ; bars on the wing coverts ill-defined, often consisting only of a V-shaped buff spot on the shaft ; the abdomen, dirty-white, with clouded dusky-black bars on the flanks ; feet, brownish.

**Soft Parts.**—Iris, orange or carmine, periocular skin, vermilion ; bill, greenish horn, blackish on culmen, carmine at base ; feet, carmine.

**Dimensions.**—*Male* : total length, 9'0 in. ; wing, 5'1 in. ; tail, 2'2 in. ; tarsus, 1'7 in. ; bill from gape, 1'05 in. *Female* : total length, 8'5 in. ; wing, 4'8 in. ; tail, 2'1 in. ; tarsus, 1'6 in. ; bill from gape, 0'98 in.

**Range in the Malay Peninsula.**—Throughout the Peninsula. Terutau, in the Langkawi group and, rather doubtfully, Penang and Singapore.

**Extralimital Range.**—From Central Burma through Tenasserim and the Malay Peninsula. The Malay Archipelago to Celebes and the Moluccas, and far into the Pacific. The species has not been critically studied, but a division into local races may be possible.

**Nidification.**—Nothing is known of their nesting habits in the Malay Peninsula.

**Habits.**—We know little of the habits of this rail in the Malay Peninsula, where it is generally distributed, though not particularly common, but more abundant in the north than in the south. It is found at the edges of ricefields and along watercourses and rivers, and sometimes, though not often, in the mangrove belts. It is, like its relatives, of very skulking habits, and hard to shoot though easy to snare.

It is a resident in the Peninsula throughout the year, but in the months from October to April its numbers are very largely augmented by migrants. In October 1911, at Alor Stah, in Kedah, very many were captured in the rice-fields round the town in an exhausted condition, and sold in the streets for a couple of cents apiece. There had for some days previously been heavy rain and strong northerly and north-easterly winds. The bird is also common on migration at the lighthouse on the One Fathom

Bank, fifteen miles from land, off the coast of Selangor, in the months of November and December.

*Remarks.*—Another species of this genus, *R. superciliaris* (Eyton), occurs on migration during the winter months. It is distinguished by its smaller bill, duller coloration, absence of the bars on the wing coverts and the inner secondaries, and by its greenish black legs.