

## THE CHESTNUT RAIL AT DARWIN

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Storr (1977) gives the range and status of the Chestnut Rail *Eulabeornis castaneoventris* in the Northern Territory as "North and east coasts and tidal sections of rivers from Darwin to the Roper; also Melville Island, Groote Eylandt and Sir Edward Pellew Group . . . Moderately common. Mangroves; rarely adjacent grassy flats and reedy swamps. Breeding from October to January." Some information about the habits, nests and eggs of this little-known rail may be found in Mathews (1910-1911), White (1917) and McLennan (1917). The present article gives details of nesting at Darwin, and of a further extension of known range in the Northern Territory, at Port Keats.

It was fortunate that the people I stayed with during my visit to Darwin, in 1972, lived on the outskirts of the town, not far from the racecourse. Thus I was in walking distance of the upper reaches of the Ludmilla Creek and the flats in the area, which proved rewarding for birds. Much of my time was spent among

the mainly mangrove-covered creeks and flats, which were flooded during high tides.

On 11 October I was resting upon one of the few dry logs in the area when I heard a clicking noise. Silently raising myself, I saw a Chestnut Rail *Eulabeornis castaneoventris* nearby feeding upon small crabs in the mud, and causing the sounds that roused my attention. I had a splendid view and then moved to make the bird run.

When the bird had vanished I commenced a search for a possible nest. This I found within a distance of 40 m, placed in the crotch of a large mangrove tree, growing at the side of a small creek. (See plate 1.) Inspection indicated that it was an old nest being prepared. The position was marked, and on 19 October I decided to check it. As I approached noisily through a thicket of small mangroves growing among a type of couch grass, I had a brief glimpse of a Rail, and, proceeding to a distance of 60 m, reached the tree to find that the nest contained four warm eggs. I had evidently disturbed and seen the mate of the sitting bird.

Nest description. The nest had obviously been in use for a number of years. It comprised a heap of old dead sticks placed in the crotch of the tree, and the width was about .6 of a metre from the base to a height of one metre. The nest tapered towards the top, and the egg cavity containing smaller sticks was 200 mm. in diameter. The nest was placed 2.6 m above the ground. Roots like tentacles came down from the tree to the ground surface, which was covered at high tide.

Egg Description. Longitudinal in shape. All very similar with almost no gloss. Ground colour pinkish creamy white with markings of reddish-brown and purple, some of which are under the surface.

Measurements: 5.56 x 3.60 cm; 5.39 x 3.65 cm; 5.58 x 3.59 cm; 5.35 x 3.65 cm.

Leaving the area by another route, I found a second nest in a smaller mangrove tree. (See plate 2.)

On 30 October, I was in the mangroves in the vicinity of where the large sewer mains enter the creek, some distance from where the nests were found. I heard a loud call which attracted my attention. It resembled that of the Pied Goose *Anseranas semipalmata* to some extent, and also had barking and trumpeting notes. All the sounds were fast, loud and penetrating. Investigating, I used the old trick of moving when the call was sounding, thus sup-

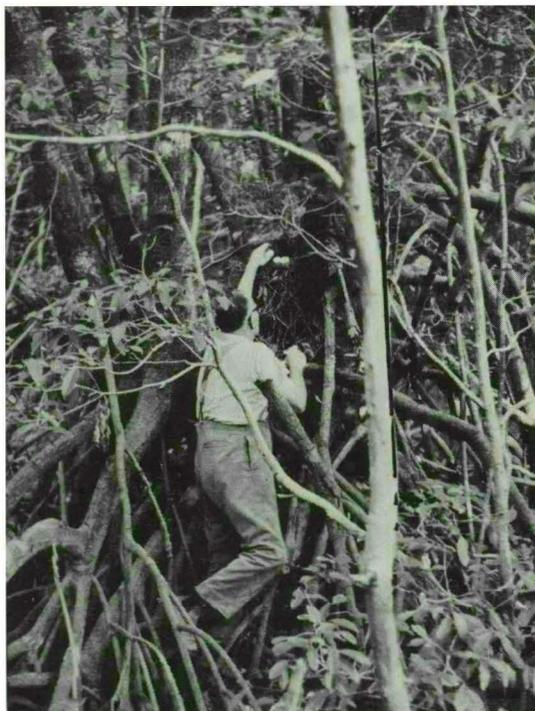


Plate 1. The author pointing out the first nest.

pressing the fact of my progress. After several advances in this manner, I suddenly came upon three Rails which immediately made for cover.

A visit was made to the second nest at 14.40 hours on 1 November, and a sharp (alarm) call was heard as I approached it, to find it contained one egg. I noticed that a mangrove limb which had been leaning against the tree crotch had been removed, and a number of bare footmarks were in the mud at the base of the tree. Probably these were from children attending a nearby school. On 3 November, at 15.40 hours, the nest contained three eggs.

**Nest Description.** Made of dry sticks placed in the crotch of a medium sized mangrove tree and 1.9 m from the ground. The base of the nest was .5 m wide and .75 of a metre high. The egg cavity was again 220 mm wide. The eggs were similar to those previously described.

This species was unknown from the Darwin area although its avifauna had been much studied, and described in a recent paper (Crawford, 1972). If such a large, noisy bird could escape attention for so long, one wonders what else remains undetected.

During my stay, I visited many areas containing mangroves, but failed to find any evidence of the bird elsewhere. However, most of these were more of a fringe of trees bordering a creek. At Ludmilla there are extensive tidal flats and many small creek channels, which may indicate a preferred habitat.

The area is not a pleasant one to visit, being very muddy and smelly. It was difficult to find my direction, as the canopy often blankets the sky and the channels, being tidal, are unreliable. My visits were always made alone and unknown to anyone else, so I had to be prudent in my movements.

By courtesy of the Curator of Birds (Mr. S. A. Parker) at the South Australian Museum, I have examined the three clutches of eggs in the Museum Collection. These are all unquestionably authentic. They comprise B 16117 c/3 taken at Port Keats in 1906 by C. E. May and a c/6 B9914 taken by the same collector. No



*Plate 2. The second nest.*

other data are given. By far the most interesting clutch is c/2 B14291 taken near Oenpelli Mission Station on 7 November, 1919, by Jack Bell for the late J. N. McGilp. They measure 5.24 x 3.63 cm and 5.27 x 3.60 cm respectively. The data are as follows: "The nest was made by treading down a quantity of reeds and rushes amidst a clump of reeds on a small island in a large swamp close to the Aboriginal Mission Station. The nest was found by noting a long well beaten track made by the birds through the reeds. The nest was of four eggs, but two were smashed in transit from Pt. Darwin."

#### REFERENCES

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