

This apparently flightless marsh-dwelling rail remains known from only two sites within the Zapata Swamp, Cuba, where it is assumed to have suffered particularly from dry-season burning of habitat and perhaps also from introduced predators.

DISTRIBUTION The Zapata Rail is endemic to Cuba, and for many years since it was first described in 1927 it was believed to occur only in a very restricted area about 1.5 km north of Santo Tomás (22°24'N 81°25'W in OG 1963a), Matanzas province (Barbour and Peters 1927, Garrido and García Montaña 1975). However, Barbour's (1928) surmise that the species would be found elsewhere in the Zapata area was borne out in June 1978 when a bird was observed in one of the channels leading to Guamá village (in the south-eastern corner of Laguna del Tesoro (22°21'N 81°07'W in OG 1963a) and a young bird was photographed at Guamá, Laguna del Tesoro, on 12 June 1978 (Clements 1979, Garrido 1985, J. F. Clements *in litt.* 1991), this new locality being about 65 km from Santo Tomás (Bond 1985). Fossil bones from cave deposits in Pinar del Río province and on the Isle of Pines (Isla de la Juventud) have been attributed to this species (Olson 1974), suggesting a wider former distribution (Garrido 1985). Few specimens have been taken; those in ANSP and MCZ are labelled "Santo Tomás, Península de Zapata, Cuba", one in AMNH "Ciénaga de Zapata, Cuba".

POPULATION At least four birds were collected in 1927 (specimens in MCZ) and Bond (1971) had no difficulty in finding the species in 1931, when two birds were collected and others seen and heard. However, thereafter it was not seen for several decades (Regalado Ruíz 1981). Garrido (1980) failed to find the species in more than five expeditions to the Santo Tomás area, therefore considering it to be "very scarce" and obviously "much less common than 50 years before". The voice was recorded in the mid-1970s, and more birds were observed in 1979 and 1980 (Morton 1979, Garrido 1985). These records together with the new locality for the species at Laguna del Tesoro led Garrido (1985) to comment that the species "may be more widespread in the swamp than previously thought" and that "if no disastrous fires or droughts occur, the rail should not be in any danger". Bond (1971) pointed out the secretive habits of rails and that there are "vast stretches of virtually impenetrable swamp land in the vicinity of Santo Tomás". However, the burnings (see Threats) that occur in the swamp could be a major reason for the scarcity of the species, as it is apparently almost flightless (Regalado Ruíz 1981, Olson 1974). Sulley and Sulley (1992) considered the species to be rare although "regularly heard in the Santo Tomás area".

ECOLOGY The Zapata Rail inhabits dense bush-covered swampland near higher ground at Santo Tomás (Bond 1979) where sawgrass *Cladium jamaicense* and "arraigán" *Myrica cerifera* are common (King 1978-1979, Regalado Ruíz 1981); the habitat where it was found in the Laguna del Tesoro region has not been described. Other aspects of its life history are poorly known (Ripley 1977). Bond (1973) noted that the two specimens collected in January 1931 had "somewhat enlarged testes", and the first nest ever reported was found near Santo Tomás on 7 September 1982; it was situated c.60 cm above water level in a hummock of sawgrass and contained three eggs (Bond 1984).

THREATS Some areas of the Zapata Swamp have been drained, but these are not extensive and should have caused no great harm to the rail's habitat (King 1978-1979). Extensive grass-cutting formerly occurred for roof-thatch, but probably much more devastating for the species are the common man-started fires during the dry season (Morton 1979, Regalado Ruíz 1981), which still occur today (O. H. Garrido *in litt.* 1991). Barbour (1928) and Garrido (1985) both noted the presence of the introduced mongoose *Herpestes* and rats *Rattus*, which could constitute a very substantial additional threat.

MEASURES TAKEN The Zapata Rail has been afforded protection with an area of 10,000 ha in the Corral de Santo Tomás Faunal Refuge, and Laguna del Tesoro falls within the Guana, Playa Larga, Playa Girón Nature Tourism Area (Wright 1988; see also ICGC 1978), but no information exists concerning the benefit these measures bestow upon the Zapata Rail.

Threatened birds of the Americas

MEASURES PROPOSED A survey of the species is urgently needed, with a special effort to delimit accurately its range, numbers and potential threats (see Remarks). Dry-season burning of the swamp must be investigated and controlled.

REMARKS The Zapata Rail occurs in the same area of the Zapata Swamp as the threatened Zapata Wren *Ferminia cerverai* and the nominate race of the threatened Cuban Sparrow *Torreornis inexpectata*, and clearly any intensive survey work on one of these forms (all of them need it) should be expanded to include the other two.