

Genus RALLUS, *Linn.*

GEN. CHAR. *Beak* slender, longer than the head, slightly arched or straight, compressed at its base, cylindrical at its point; the upper *mandible* furrowed. *Nostrils* communicating, lateral, opened longitudinally in the furrow, partly closed by a membrane. *Tarsi* long and strong, naked above the knees. *Toes* three before and one behind; the anterior ones divided; the posterior articulated upon the tarsus. *Wings* moderate and rounded; the third and fourth *quill-feathers* longest.

WATER RAIL.

Rallus aquaticus, Linn.

Le Rale d'Eau.

THE Water Rail is very generally dispersed over Europe, but abounds principally in the low flat lands of Holland, France and Germany, where fresh-water morasses, swamps, and rivers afford a congenial and native habitat; and although never observed in any abundance in the British Islands, the apparent scarcity must be attributed rather to its cunning and retired habits than to its being really a rare bird. Except when closely pressed, the Water Rail seldom takes to flight, but evades pursuit by quietly yet quickly traversing the bottoms of thick-set reed-beds and banks overgrown with luxuriant vegetation, bordering the sides of pools and ditches, where it finds a covert, through which its slender and compressed form enables it to pass with the greatest facility; besides which it possesses the power of swimming and diving, both of which materially aid its escape. Without denying the possibility of this bird being migratory, we have the strongest reason to believe that numbers remain with us during the whole of the year, frequenting during the summer season fen land, morasses, ponds, and ditches, about which it incubates; resorting on the approach of winter to the sides of our large streams and rivers. Its nest is composed of rushes and vegetable fibres, closely concealed among herbage, at a little elevation from the water; its nidification, in fact, closely resembles that of the Moorhen. Its eggs are of a yellowish white colour, marked with spots of red brown. Its food consists of worms, snails, soft insects and their larvæ, which abound in swampy places; vegetable substances also form a part. The young when first excluded from the egg are covered with black down, and are observed to be in perfect possession of the powers of swimming, and providing for their own safety and subsistence; remaining, however, under the parent's care and protection. In a short time their plumage undergoes a change; the feathers characterizing the species advance through the down, and they then nearly resemble the adult bird, but are to be distinguished by the breast and under parts being of a reddish brown, and the markings of the flanks more obscure and undefined. The sexes are alike in plumage, but the male is generally the largest. The throat is whitish; the sides of the head, neck, breast and belly of a blueish ash; the upper surface brown, the centre of each feather black; the feathers of the flanks are barred transversely with clear black and white; the under tail-coverts white; the beak red at its base, becoming gradually black towards the tip; irides reddish orange; feet and toes light brown.

We have figured an adult bird of its natural size.