
First-ever photographs of Sakalava Rail *Amaurornis olivieri* and first detailed observations since 1962

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Premières photos du Râle d'Olivier *Amaurornis olivieri* et premières observations détaillées depuis 1962. L'auteur rapporte l'observation du Râle d'Olivier *Amaurornis olivieri*, espèce endémique à Madagascar et gravement menacée d'extinction, au Lac Ampandra (16 39'S 44 49'E), près du village de Bejofo-Antanadava, district de Besalampy, dans le nord-ouest de Madagascar, le 29 novembre 2002. Deux adultes et un couple avec deux jeunes âgés d'environ deux semaines ont été vus. Le lendemain, l'auteur a pu photographier l'espèce et obtenir un enregistrement des vocalisations pour la toute première fois.

Sakalava Rail *Amaurornis olivieri* is one of the least-known birds in Africa. It is endemic to Madagascar where it is known from three widely separated localities in the Sakalava country of the western lowlands. It is considered globally threatened, in the category Critically Endangered. It was first described in 1929 from an undated specimen obtained at Antsalova, near Maintirano at c18 40'S 44 37'E³. The species was then found c300 km to the north-east, at Ambararatabe, near Lac Kinkony, (c16 19'S 46 04'E), where seven specimens were obtained in March 1931, six of them along the Tsiribahina River⁵. A female was taken from a nest at Nosy Ambositra on the Mangoky River (21 55'S 44 00'E), approximately 360 km south of the type locality in March 1962¹. In May 1995 a single was seen at Lac Bemamba (18 46'S 44 22'E)⁴ but subsequent searches in this area have proved unsuccessful. In December 2001, two were observed at a marsh known as Amborompotsy, near the village of Andimaka (19 50'S 44 43'E), c30 km south of the Manambolo River; this is c75 km south-southeast of Lac Bemamba⁷.

The birds along the Tsiribahina River were found 'on floating vegetation on a narrow deep stream bordered with coarse grass locally called 'bararata', apparently *Phragmites mauritianus*⁵. The nest at Nosy Ambositra was 50 cm above ground in bulrushes *Typha angustifolia* near water in a marshy area with bulrushes, water-lilies *Nymphaea stellata* and *Phragmites mauritianus*, and stretches of open water. The two eggs, presumed to be a complete clutch, were creamy white marked with chestnut.

The species may suffer from loss of habitat owing to increasing rice cultivation and the impact

of introduced fish. It may also suffer from systematic exploitation for food, and the eggs from the only known nest were eaten by local people². At Lac Bemamba, Ramanampamonjy was told that its flesh was good, and that it had become scarce in the area because it was trapped and its nests were robbed in September–October. His informant indicated that the species had not been seen or caught in the area for six years⁶.

In late October 2002 I set out from Mahajunga in north-west Madagascar, accompanied by Sama Zefania from BirdLife International (Madagascar), to survey wetland habitats in the hope of finding the species. Our eight-day search of Lac Kinkony and the Tsiribahina River proved unsuccessful. The habitat on the Tsiribahina River where Rand collected in 1931 had changed beyond recognition; there was very little *Phragmites* or floating vegetation remaining and smaller waterways were choked with the exotic floating water-hyacinth *Eichhornia crassipes*. We showed local people a laminated card with an illustration of the species, but they did not recognise the bird. Eventually we did find one villager who had seen the species at Lac Kinkony. He was able to tell us that the bird had a local (Sakalava) name, 'Vorfaly'. 'Faly' (or 'fady') means taboo, so the species is effectively protected in this area.

Now armed with a Sakalava name as well as the illustrations I continued alone, travelling on foot and by ox-cart. In the Ambohipaky region, c80 km west of Kinkony, there were many apparently suitable lakes with *Phragmites* beds and floating vegetation but unfortunately water levels were unusually low due to a localised drought. The bird was not widely known to local people, but with the

help of Vincente Ramana, a villager who acted as my guide, I was able to find three persons who recognised the bird from the illustration and also knew the local name. One said that ‘Vorfaly’ was ‘the King of Birds’, presumably in deference to its local taboo status. I was told that 1–2 pairs occurred in at least three sites in the Ambohipaky area. The birds were apparently very shy and difficult to see, except during the wet season when they could be seen on floating vegetation away from the *Phragmites* beds. Thus, after spending nearly two weeks surveying 12 sites in this area, all I had to show was an inconclusive silhouette view of two small rails in dense *Phragmites* at one of the sites.

After five weeks in the field I reached the small village of Bejofo-Antanandava, Besalampy district, on 29 November. Vincente and I eventually found a villager who not only recognised the illustration but also said that he could show us the bird! The site was Lac Ampandra (16°39’S 44°49’E), a short distance from the village. As I watched our new guide thatching his roof with palm fronds, I waited impatiently with a mixture of mounting excitement and a feeling that this would be another false alarm (at other sites some locals had confused the bird with Allen’s Gallinule *Porphyryla alleni*). On reaching the lake we hired a dugout canoe from a fisherman and paddled across the lake towards the *Phragmites* beds. After c1 hour, by which time I was becoming increasingly less optimistic, the boatman suddenly began to hone in on a call, which he had recognised. As we approached the reeds, in a shaded inlet covered with floating vegetation, there was an adult Sakalava Rail! We eventually found two single adults and a pair with two chicks, approximately two weeks old. The birds were not shy and permitted a careful approach to within 2 m. The following morning we returned to the site and I was fortunate to obtain the first photographs and sound-recordings of the species (the latter have been deposited at the National Sound Archive, London, UK).

The birds inhabited dense ‘bararata’, here reaching a height of 3–4 m, with floating vegetation, mainly *Nymphaea* and *Eichhornia* between the clumps of reeds. The birds walked in a *Jacana*-like manner on the floating vegetation where they picked food items from the surface. The tail was held cocked and flicked constantly. When disturbed the adults climbed to about 1.5 m in the dense *Phragmites*, the chicks vanishing into the base of the clumps. The mantle, upperwing-coverts,

scapulars, tertials and rump were bright chestnut-brown (Figs 1–3). The edges of the closed primaries were duller brown. The crown, nape, face-sides, throat, breast, rest of underparts and tail were dark slate-grey. The bill was bright yellow with a hint of greenish, quite long, slightly decurved and deep at the base. The eyes were bright red, surrounded by a vivid vermilion orbital ring. In deep shade the pupils dilated to an extent that the eye appeared black surrounded by the bright orbital ring. The legs and feet were bright pinkish red. The downy chicks were overall sooty grey with a hint of brown on the mantle, and the legs and feet were blackish with a hint of dark red on the anterior of the tarsus. The bill was black with a bright pale pink base to the upper mandible. The eyes were dark. The contact call, a constantly repeated *kick* was uttered by both adults with chicks and also by the other two individuals.

The species was well known to the boatman (G Malem) who estimated that there might be 20 pairs at the site. He said that it was double-brooded and that in the wet season when the area was inundated, it could be seen feeding along the lakeshore away from the *Phragmites* beds. Besides the contact note, he knew of another call that he described as *tirreee*, probably uttered during display. In this region the bird has no local name and is not protected by ‘Fady’; however it is not hunted as it is considered to be too small, the locals preferring the much larger Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*. My guide had never seen a nest and said that local people did not take the eggs for food. There are several other lakes in the area, including Lac Amparihy, a large site with extensive reedbeds where the species is apparently common (L Ramamonjy pers comm). Unfortunately, I was unable to visit these sites due to the onset of the rains, which resulted in swollen rivers making access impossible (see Fig 4 for sites surveyed).

It would appear that Sakalava Rail still inhabits small lakes with ‘bararata’ and floating vegetation in the northern part of its known range where it may be locally common at some sites. During the dry season the species is apparently confined to the impenetrable ‘bararata’ beds which are virtually impossible to enter on foot (the water was 1.5 m deep at Lac Ampandra). One would be very fortunate to observe the species from the shore. During the wet season, when the bird is evidently easier to see, most of the sites are inaccessible. The

species is protected by taboo in the Lac Kinkony and Ambohipaky areas and is not hunted. In the Ambohipaky, Befania and Bejofo areas the habitat would appear to be comparatively safe, as there is a locally important fishing industry. Dried fish is the main source of income for the villagers and it is unlikely that lakes would be drained for rice cultivation. 'Bararata' is cut in large quantities for a variety of uses, but this practice appears to be sustainable, as there is no obvious sign of destroyed reedbeds at any of the sites. Although hunters from Mahajunga regularly shoot waterfowl at lakes in the Ambohipaky and Befania region, it is unlikely that they would target Sakalava Rail because of its small size and the dense cover provided by its preferred habitat. There is a multitude of potentially suitable lakes between the Sambao and Manambaho Rivers, and also near Maintirano, which have yet to be surveyed.

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Figure 1. Adult Sakalava Rail / Râle d'Olivier adulte *Amaurornis olivieri*, Lac Ampandra, Madagascar, November 2002 (Iain Robertson)



Figure 2. Adult Sakalava Rail / Râle d'Olivier adulte *Amaurornis olivieri*, Lac Ampandra, Madagascar, November 2002 (Iain Robertson)



Figure 3. Adult Sakalava Rail / Râle d'Olivier adulte *Amaurornis olivieri*, Lac Ampandra, Madagascar, November 2002 (Iain Robertson)

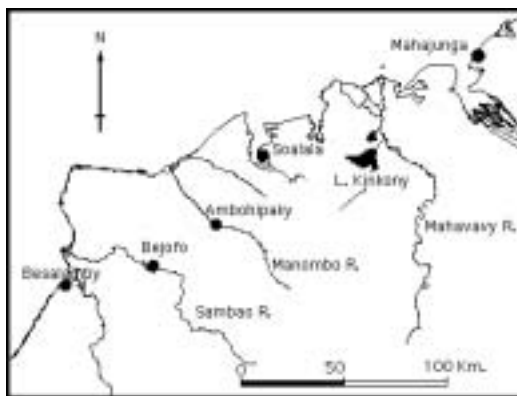


Figure 4. Map of sites surveyed in north-west Madagascar. Carte des sites inventoriés dans le nord-ouest de Madagascar