

## Chula Vista Nature Center

### Light-footed Clapper Rail Captive Propagation & Release and Artificial Nest Augmentation

2011 marks the tenth season of captive propagation and release activity for Light-footed clapper rails, *rallus longirostris levipes*. To date more than 300 rails will have been released in to southern California; more that 10% of those in San Diego Bay. Another dozen-plus birds will be releases in late September.

#### 2011 Breeding and Release Activities

The breeding potential for the year consisted of nine pairs; three pairs with the Nature Center, two pairs at SeaWorld, and four pairs at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park. This represents the largest captive breeding flock since efforts were initiated in 1998.



Richard Zembal and Michael Mace apply metal bands to a rail before release

The increased breeding pool was established to allow continuity within

the program and to facilitate rotation or replacing more productive breeding birds in an effort to properly manage the bloodlines of release birds.

Two of the Nature Center pairs successfully produced a total of five clutches of chicks. SeaWorld and San Diego Zoo Safari Park also contributed to the breeding success with two clutches of chicks each.

The Nature Center continues to be the sole facilitator of the important pre-release behavioral conditioning for all release rails. The pre-release conditioning is a four to six week process which occurs within Sweetwater Marsh and is facilitated by Nature Center staff and volunteers.



11 rails being released into San Diego River Preserve

Release Location	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	Total
Point Mugu	7	11	20	12	17	3	5	27	5	-	-	107
Seal Beach NWR	-	6	7	5	-	-	-	13	5	-	-	36
Sweetwater Marsh	-	4	-	-	11	-	-	6	-	14	3	38
Kendall-Frost	-	-	5	-	-	-	-	-	7	-	-	12
Batiquitos Lagoon	-	-	-	8	8	-	-	-	-	-	-	16
San Elijo Lagoon	-	-	-	8	-	5	4	-	16	-	-	33
Agua Hedionda Lagoon	-	-	-	5	-	-	-	-	-	-	6	11
Los Penasquitos Lagoon	-	-	-	4	-	-	4	-	9	-	-	17
Buena Vista Lagoon	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15	15
Carpinteria Marsh	-	-	-	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2
SD River Preserve	-	-	-	-	5	-	5	-	-	5	11	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>41</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>313</b>

Number of Captive-reared Light-footed Clapper Rails Released, 2001 – 2011. (There are still more rails to be relapsed at time of report)

#### Artificial Nest Platform Deployment and Nest Monitoring

As of spring 2011, 15 artificial nest platforms are deployed into Sweetwater Marsh. None of the artificial nest structures were determined to be utilized for egg incubation. However, several of the structures are near known wild rail pairs. Given the state of cord grass and other vegetation in the areas, the structures probably serve as brood nests and refuge for young chicks during foraging activities.

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#### Educational Endeavors & Field Investigations

As the breeding success continues, the program participant's educational efforts expand as well. Chula Vista Nature Center, SeaWorld San Diego, and San Diego Zoo Safari Park continue to contribute to the breeding efforts of the clapper rail. Additionally, both have included new educational components that highlight clapper rail natural history and conservation efforts. The Nature Center had approximately 70,000 visitors between Jun2010 and June 2011.

- **SeaWorld San Diego** installed interpretive signage to educate guests about the clapper rails and the importance of coastal wetlands. The Education Department includes the clapper rail breeding enclosures as part of their behind-the-scenes tours and day camp programs
- **San Diego Zoo Safari Park** created a substantial conservation exhibit that includes a section on clapper rails. The rail portion includes an interactive component that allows guests to use a hand-held radio telemetry receiver to find a family of clapper rail, life-sized sculptures in a simulated tidal creek.
- **U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service** has launched a toxicology study, through their Ecological Services department. The investigation is attempting to identify contaminant levels of lead and other toxins within several southern California National Wildlife Refuges by examining clapper rail shell fragments, blood samples, and carcasses. The clapper rail is an ideal test subject since they do not migrate and have a relatively localized foraging territory. Nature Center staff has assisted in the study by collecting shell fragments and un-hatched eggs at Tijuana River Estuary and Sweetwater Marsh. Nature Center staff also facilitated a wild foods study for a clapper rail family unit, consisting of two adults and five chicks. The study involved feeding the rail test subjects live fishes and crabs collected within Sweetwater Marsh followed by taking blood samples. Results of this study are pending.
- **Chula Vista Nature Center** continues to feature the Light-footed clapper rail as its marquis symbol. Nature Center guests are currently able to view three different pairs of clapper rails in two distinct areas. In addition housing two pairs of breeding rails in *Clapper Rail Creek*, an additional pair has been established in the popular *Turtle Lagoon* exhibit. The endangered Eastern Pacific Green sea turtle and Light-footed clapper rails are the first things guests see as they begin their visit at the Nature Center. An educational booklet featuring clapper rails, *Chula Vista Nature Center Kid's Guide*, is available to educators, students, and guests to enhance the learning opportunities and provide a take home piece.

#### Online Education & Outreach

**Facebook** has grown to over 2,000 fans in 2011.

(<https://www.facebook.com/cvnaturecenter>)

**Twitter** is a fairly new platform for the Nature Center; there are 251 people following the feed.

(<http://twitter.com/#search?q=CVNatureCenter>)

**Tumblr** is hosting a blog series for clapper rail and animal related content. (<http://cvnc.tumblr.com>)

**The Nature Center Website** has been improved and now has a Spanish language version. The live *Rail Cam* still broadcasts a real-time video feed from a pair of clapper rails.

<http://www.chulavistanaturecenter.org/>



*Rail interpretive sign at San Diego Zoo Safari Park. The sign explains the artificial nest program, captive breeding & release efforts, natural nesting strategy, and Light-footed clapper rail range & status.*



*Rail family as seen on CVNC rail web cam*

## **Chula Vista Nature Center**

### **Light-footed Clapper Rail Captive Propagation & Release and Artificial Nest Augmentation**

#### **Conclusion**

Recovery efforts over the past decade have had a positive impact on the southern California population. A total of 422 pairs of Light-footed Clapper Rails exhibited breeding behavior in 19 marshes in 2011. This is one of the highest counts on record since population monitoring began in the 1980s.

This year marks the tenth anniversary of the first successful captive hatch and release of Light-footed clapper rails. To date 313 clapper rails have been released into 11 locations in southern California. The season's efforts will conclude with the release of approximately 15 more birds. The reintroduction efforts and their results are encouraging for the future of rails in California. These and other activities favor the future of this highly endangered marsh resident for the San Diego sub-population. Habitat improvements in south San Diego Bay combined with ongoing public awareness efforts combined with continued reintroduction activities should all contribute to a larger and healthier rail population in years to come.

#### **Media Reports**

The return of Amelia, the clapper rail that traveled 160 miles to return to San Diego Bay after her release in Mugu Lagoon, received considerable print and television coverage. The program also captured media and public attention with the release of the 300<sup>th</sup> rail. Release activities at two locations on July 18 were covered by four television outlets and two newspapers. The television outlets aired a story about the rail release and the conservation efforts at least once each. Several stations ran the story multiple times. KPBS, San Diego's 89.5 radio station also aired news about the releases.

Sign On San Diego was one of several online news sources and blogs to feature the release activities. Sign On San Diego published a photo album that can be seen at:

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/photos/galleries/2011/jul/19/endangered-bird-release/22040/#galleries>

#### **Enclosures**

1. Joint Press Release (US. Fish and Wildlife Service, San Diego Zoo, SeaWorld San Diego, Chula Vista Nature Center)
2. News Clipping Report from July 20, 2011 – one article
3. News Clipping Report from July 28, 2011 – three articles
4. Chula Vista Nature Center *Children's Activity Guide* (English Version)



**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**July 18, 2011**

## **MEDIA ADVISORY**

### **ENDANGERED BIRDS TO BE RELEASED INTO SAN DIEGO RIVER CHANNEL AND BUENA VISTA LAGOON**

**Events Mark 10<sup>th</sup> year of 'Team Clapper Rail' and Release of 300<sup>th</sup> clapper rail**

**WHAT:** Team Clapper Rail celebrates an exciting milestone tomorrow (Tuesday, July 19, 2011) as they release 30 endangered light-footed clapper rails into two marshland locations. The events mark the 300<sup>th</sup> bird released as part of a 10-year breeding program administered by three San Diego conservation organizations: SeaWorld San Diego, the Chula Vista Nature Center, and the San Diego Zoo's Safari Park. The clapper rail recovery program is a partnership between the three breeding centers, along with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, the Unified Port of San Diego, and independent wildlife biologists (together known as Team Clapper Rail) for the survival of this critically endangered species.

**WHEN:** Tuesday, July 19, 2011

**WHERE:** **8:30 a.m.:** 20 birds to be released at Buena Vista Lagoon, 2202 S. Coast Highway, Oceanside

**11 a.m.:** 10 birds to be released at the San Diego River Channel, on South Shores Park Drive

**BACKGROUND:** In the early 1900s Light-footed clapper rails were common residents in Southern California marshlands, but the species has become endangered due to loss of coastal wetland habitats. Through the development of a successful breeding and release program, 300 clapper rails (including tomorrow's releases) have been released into Southern California's coastal salt marshes since 2001. Annual surveys indicate that the introduction of captive-bred birds and other conservation efforts are paying off. Wild rail populations are at their highest level since yearly censuses were begun in the 1980s. The population has grown from, as few as 142 pairs in 1985, to 372 pairs in 2010.

**VISUALS:** **Broadcast media:** SeaWorld will provide video footage of the San Diego River Channel release after 3 p.m. tomorrow (July 19, 2011).

**Print media:** High-resolution JPEGs of both releases available upon request.

#### **CONTACTS:**

SeaWorld San Diego: Kelly Terry, (619) 666-8048; [kelly.terry@seaworld.com](mailto:kelly.terry@seaworld.com)

San Diego Zoo's Safari Park: Christina Simmons, (619) 685-3291; [csimmons@sandiegozoo.org](mailto:csimmons@sandiegozoo.org)

Chula Vista Nature Center: Charles Gailband, cell (619) 400-9576; [Charles@cvnc.us](mailto:Charles@cvnc.us)

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service: Jane Hendron, (760) 431-9440, ext. 205; cell: (760) 207-4997; [Jane\\_Hendron@fws.gov](mailto:Jane_Hendron@fws.gov)

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# News Summary



**ATTENTION:**

**Bridget Bennett-Palitz**

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## **Chula Vista Nature Center**

**July 20, 2011**

<u>Keyword</u>	<u>Publication</u>	<u>Publication Date</u>	<u>Page #</u>	<u># of Pages</u>
<u>Chula Vista Nature Center</u>				
Article	North County Times-Inland	July 20, 2011	1,7	3
Article	Enlace-Sur	July 09, 2011	10	1
	<b>TOTAL ARTICLES</b>	<b>2</b>		



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# Lagoon gets flock of clapper rails

## 15 endangered birds released on Tuesday

By **PAUL SISSON**  
[psisson@nctimes.com](mailto:psisson@nctimes.com)

Wings beating a staccato rhythm, 15 endangered light-footed clapper rails left blue plastic crates Tuesday morning and shot into the sky over their new home at Buena Vista Lagoon.

**ONLINE VIDEO**  
NCTIMES.COM

Jane Hendron, a biologist and spokeswoman with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, said it was the first-ever release of captive-bred clapper rails into the lagoon, which separates Oceanside and Carlsbad.

The release was part of a continuing collaboration

among SeaWorld San Diego, the Chula Vista Nature Center and the San Diego Zoo Safari Park. The effort, dubbed Team Clapper Rail, released its 300th rail into the San Diego River channel after visiting Buena Vista Lagoon on Tuesday.

An unassuming bird with red-brown feathers, a long curved beak and long slender legs, the light-footed clapper rail has been on the

See **Rails**, A7



**Fifteen endangered light-footed clapper rails were released Tuesday into the Buena Vista Lagoon in Oceanside.** JAMIE SCOTT LYTLE | [jlytle@nctimes.com](mailto:jlytle@nctimes.com)



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## Rails

Continued from Page A1

endangered list since 1970 because of loss of its salt marsh habitat. A distinctive "clappering" call gives the bird its name.

The breeding program run by the three agencies has helped increase the bird's population from 142 breeding pairs in 1985 to 424 today, according to government surveys.

The team has conducted clapper rail releases in previous years in other San Diego County lagoons and estuaries, including Batiquitos and San Elijo lagoons in North County.

However, Buena Vista is filled with fresh water from Buena Vista Creek, giving it a much different makeup from other local lagoons that regularly have salt water entering from the ocean to create traditional salt marsh habitat.

In their traditional salty habitat, clapper rails would make their nests in native cordgrass, but Buena Vista is filled with cattails and bulrushes.

Richard Sardena, manager of SeaWorld's avian department, said the

**"It hasn't been a large population, but clapper rails have persisted in Buena Vista, so the decision was made to go ahead and give them a bit of a boost."**

**ANDY MAURO**

Member of the Buena Vista Audubon Society

rails should take to the fresh-water environment just fine.

He said they have already learned to hunt crustaceans, fish and other prey in a large enclosed outdoor habitat at **Chula Vista Nature Center**.

"You'll see them, if you're in the blinds at the center, picking up lizards and crabs and whatever they can find," he said.

Local bird expert Andy Mauro, a member of the Buena Vista Audubon Society, said the lagoon is already home to at least three mated pairs of rails.

He said the species has been showing increasing signs of adapting to fresh water, even being sighted as far inland as Escondido Creek.

"It hasn't been a large population, but clapper

rails have persisted in Buena Vista, so the decision was made to go ahead and give them a bit of a boost," Mauro said.

Richard Zembal, director of the Clapper Rail Study Team, an organization based out of Huntington Beach that monitors and studies the species throughout the region, said that introduction of 15 new birds into the existing population can help provide a broader gene pool for breeding pairs that could ultimately result in more nests and eventually more birds.

"If we get the right genetic mix in a population, we could end up with a population that thrives on its own," Zembal said.

Call staff writer Paul Sisson at 760-901-4087.



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**Janessa Kite of the San Diego Zoo Safari Park holds an endangered clapper rail as Dick Zembal from the Huntington Beach Wetland Conservancy prepares to band the bird on Monday before 15 of the birds were released into the Buena Vista Lagoon in Oceanside. JAMIE SCOTT LYTLE | [jjlytle@nctimes.com](mailto:jjlytle@nctimes.com)**

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**July 28, 2011**

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Article	SDUT-Our North Coast	July 28, 2011	1	1
Article	SDUT-Our North Coast	July 28, 2011	3	2
Article	SDUT-Our North Inland	July 28, 2011	1,3	3
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Page 1 of 1



CHARLIE NEUMAN • U-T

# Saving the clapper rail

Endangered birds find a new home at Buena Vista Lagoon

PG. 3

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# ENDANGERED CLAPPER RAILS RELEASED INTO WETLANDS

## Multi-agency effort increases bird count

NATHAN SCHARN • U-T

### OCEANSIDE

Dozens of endangered light-footed clapper rails flapped out of blue boxes into their new wetland habitats last week, but they wouldn't stay airborne and in sight for long.

The brownish birds aren't much for flying, and prefer to hide among the pickleweed, scientists say. Some of those characteristics tie into why their population dropped so drastically as more and more humans began making coastal wetlands their home in the last century.

The San Diego Zoo Safari Park, SeaWorld San Diego and the Chula Vista Nature Center, working with U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, have helped lead the charge to rejuvenate the clapper rail population.

The organizations last week released 11 of the birds in the San Diego River Channel near SeaWorld and 15 in the Buena Vista Lagoon along the Oceanside-Carlsbad border.

The species was one of the first to be officially declared endangered in the 1970s, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service spokeswoman Jane Hendron said.

The clapper rail already faced a gamut of challenges, besides the development of Southern California.

They are not very mobile, and can become separated into subspecies that interbreed rarely if ever with those in nearby lagoons, limiting the bloodline and the diversity of birds. They're also a food source for many of the predators in the area, and would be lucky to live four years in a healthy ecosystem,

said Charles Gailband, director of conservation for the Chula Vista Nature Center.

The real problem for the birds came from coupling their innate challenges with the destruction of wetland habitat and introduction of new predators, such as dogs and cats, which can also double as food for other predators, like coyotes, causing indigenous populations to swell artificially.

"We get one maybe two good breeding seasons out of them," Gailband said. "They've got a hard time out there right now."

The birds released last week were bred in captivity and allowed to mature in an outdoor enclosure similar to the wetland habitat. The conservationists make sure the clapper rails are foraging for food — their favorites include crayfish and fiddler crabs — and responding appropriately when predators are around; for example, hiding among the scrub when a hawk flies overhead.

Gailband recalled one time when a hawk landed atop an enclosure, and the clapper rails came out from hiding, curious to learn more about their guest.

To counter the behavior, conservationists will rattle the cage or frighten them in other ways when predators are around so they associate them with danger.

The light-footed clapper rail habitat used to stretch from Santa Barbara well into Baja California. The species' home has contracted to reach from Ventura County to the Mexican border, according to the most recent five-year review published by the Fish & Wildlife Service.

But it's not all bad news.

The population has grown from an estimated 142 pairs in the wild in 1985 to about 424 today, conservationists say.

"When I walk in the marshes now and I see clapper rails I feel a sense of pride," said SeaWorld agriculturalist Kim Peterson.

Researchers track the birds by placing markers on their legs that help identify which birds were bred in captivity and when and where they were released into the wild.

"We've had a few cases where we've actually seen banded or marked clapper rails out there with offspring," Gailband said. "It's very difficult to get a band re-sighting because these birds are that secretive."

Gailband attributed much of the success so far to SeaWorld and the San Diego Zoological Society's involvement.

"Everyone involved in this project is really proud of what we've been able to accomplish," he said. "We've got some pretty big players in the zoo business in this program. ... This is not a California condor with a 9-foot wingspan, or a giant panda. To see this attention on a hometown species was great."

In addition to saving the birds, conservationists are trying to save the places they live.

City, state and federal government agencies are working together to keep the Buena Vista Lagoon, one of few remaining large tracts of coastal wetlands, from transforming into a wet meadow due to several man-made changes, including a weir placed near the mouth of the lagoon in 1940 that controls the water level. Researchers expect the lagoon will turn into a wet meadow in fewer than 50 years if no action is taken.

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**Tracking bands being attached to the leg of a light-footed clapper rail before the bird is released into the wild. Several organizations are working on a project to increase the population of the endangered birds and re-introduce them into local lagoons.**  
CHARLIE NEUMAN • U-T

### Clapper rail facts

- **Species overview:** The light-footed clapper rail is a secretive brown and gray bird that spends much of its time hiding among bushes. It is about 14 inches tall and forages for small animals such as crabs, crayfish, snails and beetles.
- **Predators Include:** skunks, dogs, feral cats, foxes, possums and birds of prey.
- **Status:** Listed as federally endangered Oct. 13, 1970.
- **Habitat:** Coastal wetlands on the West Coast. Clapper rails used to make their homes from Santa Barbara County to San Quintin Bay in Baja California. The species is now found from Ventura County to the Mexican border.
- **Recovery effort:** The population has grown from an estimated 142 pairs in 1985 to about 424 today.



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Endangered birds find a new home at Buena Vista Lagoon

PG. 3



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