

Water Rail (*Rallus aquaticus* L., 1758) reacting to orchestral ice sounds in the Worcestershire Avon valley

Paul F. Whitehead

Moor Leys, Little Comberton, Pershore, Worcestershire, WR10

3EH. Email: paulpfw@outlook.com

Introduction

Water Rails (*Rallus aquaticus* L.) are of frequent occurrence in reed beds naturalised on the floodplain of the River Avon in Birlingham civil parish, Worcestershire. I have known them there for more than 25 years most usually during the winter. July records in 2006 suggested possible breeding and breeding may also have occurred during 2024. One may commonly hear two or three birds vocalising in response to each other but on 10 January 2025 a somewhat remarkable event ensued which is described below.

Discussion

On that date a floodplain lake (SO9442) was ice covered (Fig. 01) apart from a group of six Mute Swans *Cygnus olor* L. rotating to maintain a small area of open water. The ice otherwise formed a continuous sheet over an area of some 12000m²; it is not known if there were any air spaces beneath it. The temperature, no higher than -2°C, was not measured but as it became colder at dusk the ice began to regellate at its margins.

This process created a long series of penetrating audible sounds that in the cold air travelled widely across the landscape. The sounds sometimes resembled wails or shrieks, orchestral notes or vibrating sheets of thin metal and continued intermittently for at least fifteen minutes until darkness ended the visit.



01. Birlingham, Worcestershire, 10 January 2025, 1632 hours GMT. The lake of shrieking ice. © P. F. Whitehead.

Despite travelling widely in arctic and subarctic Canada, Europe and Siberia I have no previous experience of this phenomenon. An on line reference to related phenomena in Iceland may be found at <https://noisefromiceland.com/noise-explained-melodies-of-the-ice-unveiling-natures-symphony-at-the-glaciers-edge/>

Of particular interest was the vocal response of Water Rails to these sounds which were uniform and repeated consistently immediately following each 'ice sound' transmission. It is not clear what these loud, somewhat grating, sounds made by two individual birds conveyed, although they bore some resemblance to so-called 'song-calls' and were quite different from the shrill or descending 'squeal-calls' that commonly hallmark their presence.

Figure

01. Birlingham, Worcestershire, 10 January 2025, 1632 hours GMT. The lake of shrieking ice. © P. F. Whitehead.