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The Community Engagement Journey: Getting There Together

From the Associate Editor

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In early January, I joined 10 volunteers for a nocturnal bird survey in the coastal marshes of Louisiana. Our target was black rails, elusive birds the size and shape of chicks that hide deep within the cover of thick marsh grass. Researchers recently confirmed the year-round presence of this rare bird in rural Cameron Parish, and surveys were being conducted to locate and band the birds and get a better handle on their population.

The survey consisted of one person holding each end of a 50-foot long dragline, to which four noisemakers were attached about 12 feet apart from each other. One to two volunteers with nets flanked each end of the line, and the rest of us walked behind it, lighting our way forward with spotlights, and when necessary, lifting the noisemakers over obstructions like scrub trees. Two additional volunteers armed with nets walked behind the line with us, in case our quarry flew toward the middle of the line.

The group set off with high hopes and expectations, and two things became quickly apparent. First, environmental conditions were not ideal; it was very difficult to traverse the uneven grass that was 3–8 feet high throughout the marsh, sometimes over our heads. The terrain was also quite uneven, and it was easy to fall. It was also cold, with temperatures in the low 40s when we began our search at 6 p.m., and which dropped into the 30s as we towed the line. Second, our bimodal age distribution was a factor; about half the group were volunteers in their 20s. This cohort had an easier time negotiating the marsh than the rest of us, whose ages were 50+.

A small cheer went up as we flushed our first bird after about 10 minutes of walking; it was a Virginia rail, and a 20-something volunteer galloped after the bird like a gazelle, following its trajectory as we lit her way. She successfully netted the bird and most of us rested while the experts quickly determined the size and sex of the

bird, took a blood sample for DNA analysis, then banded and released the bird. Although not a black rail, information about this specimen could still be used in research.

We resumed our positions and continued our tortuous path. We repeated this drill each time a bird was flushed by our dragline, with a yell or cheer, followed by a chase. Sometimes, netters were unable to capture the birds. More Virginia rails flushed, as did clapper rails and sora. Yellow rail was the most common species caught; each time we stopped, most of us relished the rest, while the researchers practiced their trade with sure hands and full transparency, answering questions that volunteers had. We also stopped for falls, as several of the volunteers (including me) lost their footing, one numerous times.

After the first half of our survey, with no black rails captured, the majority of the upper half of our bimodal age distribution bade their goodbyes and went to the lodge. I thought about quitting myself, but stuck with it despite near exhaustion. I did not want to miss a chance to observe a black rail, and I am typically game for a physical challenge. The second half of the survey was more difficult than the first, not only because I was more tired, but because we flushed almost no rails and there were almost no rest periods. I began to fall behind the line; I kept my spotlight high and did my best to light the way, but toward the end of the survey, the volunteers stopped and waited 20 seconds for me and my spotlight to catch up. I apologized for “not being able to hang,” but they laughed and reminded me that we were a team. I held my own the rest of the way, and was beyond happy when we reached the dirt road that marked the end of the survey.

The survey was supposed to take three hours; because of all the birds that were banded during the first half of our survey, it wound up taking four. We didn’t flush a single black rail.

My participation as a volunteer in this dragline survey reminded me a lot of community engagement and some of the articles in this issue of *JCES*. While participating in this survey was exhausting and uncomfortable on the one hand, it was uplifting on the other. Volunteers buoyed each other along with jokes, encouragement, and easy conversation. We lit each other's way forward with our spotlights. When someone fell, others helped her or him up. When I fell behind, the others waited for me to catch up. And while the ultimate outcome wasn't successful in terms of netting a black rail, the process of working together to try to find one was.

In community engagement, participation can be simultaneously exhausting and uplifting, because those of us who toil in the trenches of community engagement buoy each other. We take advantage of our diverse roles and our hearts (spotlights), work together, and cut each other slack when necessary. Even if it takes longer than expected, we get there together. And if the black rail represents something elusive, like equality or justice, even if we don't succeed in finding it on our journey, we still gain something through the process of looking for it. And we try again tomorrow.