

FEATURE ARTICLES

HOW TO CATCH RAILS & CRAKES

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As members of the family Rallidae are not very fond of flying, it is very difficult to catch them with mist nets, especially as they do not get entangled in the net and they therefore walk out of the shelf usually in a shorter time than the ringer takes to get to the net.

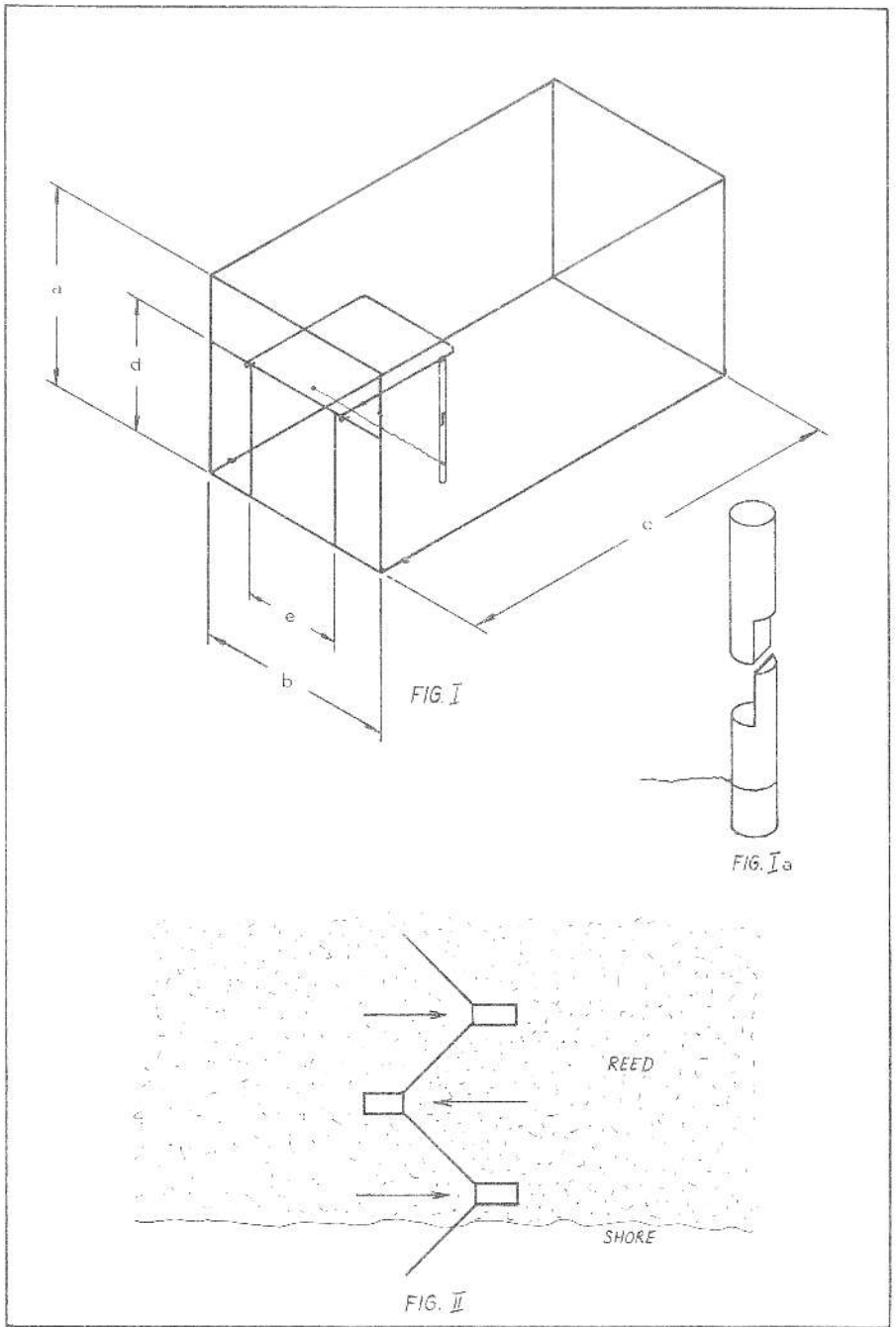
The answer to this problem is a walk-in trap. Its main advantage is that trapping can take place under all weather conditions (e.g. heavy storms, rainfall etc.) as the caught birds can move around freely in the trap and therefore do not get wet, and a bird, once caught, can never escape.

This type of trap was first designed by Messrs. Lainer, Springer, Lumper and the writer in Germany in 1959/60. The dimensions have been slightly altered in South Africa to suit availability of local materials. The frame of the trap is made up and welded together from 1/8" thick welding wire, which can be bought in 3' lengths. Dimensions a x b x c are 1ft x 1ft x 2ft (see Fig. 1), therefore one piece of welding wire can be used up without waste. The opening for the door d x e should be between 7ins x 6ins and 8ins x 8ins but the actual size does not matter as even large birds (e.g. Purple Gallinule) can walk easily through the smallest opening. The wire for the door should be made from 1/8" thick brass or copper wire (to prevent rusting of the loop and to ensure that the door closes under all conditions). The door must be installed in such a way that it can only be opened from the outside, this is achieved by making the door 1" wider than the opening. At this stage the whole trap can be covered by chicken wire 2ft high x 1ins mesh, which can be bought by the metre at any building material shop. It can only be recommended to use 1ins mesh, 1/2ins mesh will cause head injuries to the birds while walking around in the trap, bigger mesh will allow small birds (e.g. flufftails) to escape through the mesh.

The door is held open by a two-piece collapsing stick (see fig. 1a) which can be carved from any twig and should be appr. 10mm thick and 200mm total length. The bottom part of the collapsing stick is tied onto the side wall of the trap with a piece of angling string which must be appr. 25mm above the bottom of the trap. Any bird entering the trap will touch the string with its legs and therefore cause the stick to collapse and subsequently the door is closed and the bird caught.

The traps should be set in groups of at least 2 by means of guiding wires (2ft x 1ins mesh chicken wire, between 3m and 5m long) and should always be at a 90° angle to the shore (see Fig. 11).

The guiding wires must be supported by means of steel rods in



order to keep them straight and upright, 2 rods on each end are enough for 3m length, but 3 rods are required for 5m length.

I have been using these traps for 4 years in South Africa, starting with three traps and I have got 12 in operation now.

The following species have been caught so far:-

<u>Rallidae</u>	<u>Others</u>
Cape Rail	African Jacana
Black Crake	Yellow-billed Duck
Red-chested Flufftail	Cape Wagtail
Moorhen	Black-eyed Bulbul
Purple Gallinule	Great Reed Warbler
	Cape Reed Warbler

Furthermore I have caught two rats, one frog and a couple of crabs in the trap.

Altogether a total of 200 rails and crakes have been caught up to date, but the number of birds handled is already above 700, as a lot of birds are recaptured and are therefore giving a lot of information concerning moult, weight gains and losses, breeding cycle, development of chicks etc.

I also want to mention that the traps should be checked every hour during the summer months, but it might be advisable to check them every 45min. in the mornings and evenings. In winter a check every $1\frac{1}{2}$ hrs is sufficient.

Last but not least it is important to have the guiding wires set up permanently in the reed beds so that the birds get used to walking through the openings, which only must be blocked off by the traps when there is trapping activity.

(Ringers should note that the above details of the Rail Trap are included for the benefit of ringers only. SAFRING has a limited circulation to ringers and ringing organisations only. SAFRING should not be circulated outside this group - Ed.)
