

PURPLE GALLINULE IN CLINTON COUNTY, 23 SEPTEMBER-3 OCTOBER 2002

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While photographing a Great Blue Heron on 23 Sep 2002, GD's eye was drawn to movement below and to the right of his subject where he saw a single, drab marsh bird with no bars, stripes, eye ring or other distinguishing features. The following day WK and CM also found an immature Purple Gallinule (*Porphyrio martinica*) which has proven to be the northernmost recorded in New York State.

DISCOVERY

When Charlie and I set out for Ausable Point on 24 Sep, I mentioned the report of a immature Purple Gallinule then present at Montezuma NWR without considering for a moment that one could be here as well. We parked, took note of a photographer ,off to one side ,with a very long lens and got our gear out. Before I could cross the road Charlie had found New York State's second immature Purple Gallinule of the season. At this point Glen came over, introduced himself and told us that he had found and photographed the bird the day before. Thus began a collaboration that benefited each of us and that we expect to continue.

The three of us spent the next several hours rooted to the spot. Glen, a professional photographer, purposefully clicked away expending film at an alarming rate. By evening, e-mails and various rare bird alerts had been sent. Over the next ten days at least one of us was there daily to keep track of the bird and to make sure visiting birders got good looks at it. Most of the time it was very cooperative, staying in accessible areas with only moderate cover. Throughout this time Glen continued to photograph; in all he shot approximately twelve 36 exposure rolls. This article is indebted to him for generously sharing the results of his efforts and providing the accompanying photos.(Figs 1 &2)

HABITAT, IDENTIFICATION AND BEHAVIOR.

We found the young gallinule along the shore of a shallow cove of Lake Champlain on the east side of the entrance road to Ausable Point Campground, Town of Peru, Clinton County. A large marsh on the west side empties into the cove through a culvert. The banks of the cove are lined with lush vegetation. At its mouth is a sedge-covered bar about 200 yards out from the road.



Purple Gallinule in Clinton Co.,
23 Sept.-3 Oct. 2002 © Glen Drapeau

The cove is home to Pied-billed Grebes, American Bitterns, Great Blue Herons, Wood Ducks and Mallards. Other species seen while the gallinule was present include Osprey, Bald Eagle, Northern Harrier and Merlin.

The gallinule's crown and back were brownish, its cheeks and neck were a lighter and richer brown that lightened into a wash on its foreneck. The bill, which included a dark forehead shield, was reddish brown in direct sunlight but could appear gray with some yellow in other lights. Its iris was red-orange. Its chin, breast and belly were off-white; its undertail coverts snowy white. This field mark and the bird's habit of cocking its tail made it the avian equivalent of a white-tailed deer

and proved useful when searching for it. Its folded wings showed a hint of olive above a definite greenish coloration on the lower edge but neither of these colors was obvious under all lighting conditions. There was no white flank stripe but rather a small buff patch toward the rear. In flight the flanks were dark. Its legs and feet were dull yellow, the feet unwebbed and long-toed.

The bird most frequently fed in emergent vegetation—primarily pickerelweed, pond lily and spatterdock—along the margin of the waterway. During the many hours we spent observing, the only food that we actually saw it consume were snails extracted from their shells, possibly *Lymnaea* (great pond snail) which is found here. We presume the bird was also eating seeds, principally from the dominant pickerelweed. It did feed on the underside of lily pads, which were literally a cafeteria of snails, snail eggs, crustaceans, crustacean eggs and aquatic insects. When it fed among the sedges, it also gleaned food by holding the end of a plant down with its foot and running its bill along the stem. It walked on the plants while feeding, had a habit of pumping its cocked tail and swam rarely. It almost always remained at or near the water-vegetation interface in the shallower areas of the cove. When it flew, its flights were short and weak. A remarkably unwary bird that allowed close approach, it was startled into flight only twice, once by a Great Blue Heron and once by one of us. On one occasion, while trying to separate a snail from its shell, it was startled by the alarm cry of a Greater Yellowlegs. The sudden swing of its head instead separated the shell from its bill and threw the snail into deeper water. The bird made no effort to retrieve its prey.

PREVIOUS RECORDS

Even though we knew of the Purple Gallinule at Montezuma NWR, we had no reason to expect to find one here. A list of rarities that might appear in Clinton County (Mitchell & Krueger 1997) makes no mention of Purple Gallinule; nor is it included even in passing in (Bannon 1991) on birding in Montreal. The range map (Sibley 2000) has two green dots in the St. Lawrence Valley between Cornwall and Quebec City and several in the Maritime Provinces, but none in Vermont, New Hampshire or Maine. DiCostanzo (Levine 1998) mentions 35 records for New York State; of these only 4 appear to have been of immature birds and more than 25 were from Long Island. A record from Monroe County appears to have been the farthest north this bird had been seen in New York State before the Ausable Point sighting.

Editor's Note:

After the completion of this article, an immature Purple Gallinule was found on 17 Oct by John Haas at the Bashakill Wildlife Management Area in Sullivan County, for the third Purple Gallinule report of the season, all immatures.

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