

The First Record of Common Gallinule (*Gallinula galeata*) in British Columbia.

By Rick Toochin. Submitted: April 15, 2018.

Introduction and Distribution

The Common Gallinule (*Gallinula galeata*) is a water bird that occurs in eastern North America, and locally in western North America, south through Mexico, locally throughout all, but central Baja California, throughout remainder of Mexico, except largely absent from Pacific slope from Sonora to Nayarit and Michoacán to Chiapas, and absent from most of Yucatán Peninsula, but breeds locally in western and south Sonora (Colorado River, Presa Obregón region, and probably elsewhere), and on Clipperton Island and Cozumel Island (Howell and Webb 2010, Russell and Monson 1998). South of Mexico, breeds in southern Guatemala and El Salvador (Howell and Webb 2010), Costa Rica throughout, from the lowlands to 1,500 m (Stiles and Skutch 1989), and Panama in the lowlands along both slopes (Ridgely and Gwynne 1989). This species is found throughout most of South America, including Galápagos Islands, Netherlands Antilles, Trinidad and Tobago, south to northern Chile and northern Argentina (American Ornithologists' Union 1998a). The Common Gallinule is also found in Bermuda and throughout the West Indies (Amos 1991, Raffaele *et al.* 1998). This species is a resident in the Hawaiian Islands on O'ahu, Kaua'i, and Moloka'i, having been reintroduced on the latter island in 1983 and was formerly on all the main islands except Lāna'i and Kaho'olawe (Griffin *et al.* 1989, Engilis and Pratt 1993).

In the Western United States, the Common Gallinule is found locally in California along Pacific Coast from Marin to Monterey Counties and in San Diego Counties, south of San Francisco Bay, Sacramento and San Joaquin Valleys, Salton Sea, and the Colorado River (Small 1994). In Nevada, this species is mainly found in Clark and western Churchill Counties (Bannor and Kiviat 2002). In Utah, the Common Gallinule is found Utah Lake, east Great Salt Lake, Uinta Basin, and Emery and Washington Counties (Behle *et al.* 1985). In Arizona, this species is found along the Colorado River, central and southern wetland locations in Yavapai, Maricopa, Pinal, Graham, Pima, and Cochise Counties (Bannor and Kiviat 2002). In New Mexico, the Common Gallinule is found in the San Juan, central and lower Rio Grande, and lower Pecos valleys (Hubbard 1978c).

In the Central and Eastern United States and Eastern Canada, the Common Gallinule is found locally from south-eastern Minnesota, central Wisconsin, upper Lower Peninsula of Michigan, southern Ontario, extreme southern Quebec, eastern New Brunswick, and western Nova Scotia south to the Gulf Coast and southern Florida, east to the Atlantic Coast, and west to eastern Nebraska, central Kansas, western Oklahoma, and western Texas (Bannor and Kiviat 2002). Within this area, breeding is concentrated around the Great Lakes region, especially in

Minnesota, southern Michigan, southern Ontario, mainly south of Madawaska River, north-eastern Illinois, northern Indiana, northern Ohio, north-western Pennsylvania, and extreme south-eastern Quebec, mainly north to the southern St. Lawrence River, but with a disjunct population at Lac Saint-Jean (Bannor and Kiviat 2002). Breeding is also concentrated in the Gulf Coast states from southern and eastern Texas, southern Arkansas, Louisiana, southern Mississippi, southern Alabama, southern Georgia, and throughout Florida, and the Atlantic Coast states from eastern South Carolina, eastern North Carolina, north-eastern Virginia, eastern Maryland, coastal Delaware, south-eastern Pennsylvania, northern and western New Jersey, south-eastern New York, Connecticut, eastern Massachusetts, south-eastern New Hampshire, eastern Maine, eastern New Brunswick, and western Nova Scotia (Bannor and Kiviat 2002). Breeding is also concentrated in Lake Champlain and Hudson River valleys of western Vermont and western Massachusetts, and in wetlands from south-eastern Minnesota southwest through northern and western Iowa, south-eastern Nebraska, central and eastern Kansas, central and eastern Oklahoma, the Texas Panhandle, and Rio Grande valley of west Texas (Bannor and Kiviat 2002). The Common Gallinule is largely absent from the Piedmont regions of Virginia and the Carolinas west through the southern Appalachians (Potter *et al.* 1980, Bucklew and Hall 1994, Bannor and Kiviat 2002), Adirondack and Catskill Mountain regions of New York (Sibley 1988b), and from eastern Iowa south through northern Arkansas (James and Neal 1986, Dinsmore 1996a, Jacobs and Wilson 1997).

In the United States portion of the Common Gallinule's range, this species breeds principally in permanently flooded, non-tidal, deep marshes and slightly brackish or freshwater tidal marshes, where robust emergent grass-like plants about 1-4 m tall are interspersed with pools and channels that have floating-leaved and submerged plants, or with mudflats (Bannor and Kiviat 2002). In the south-eastern United States, the Common Gallinule is found in a wide variety of marshes, ponds, lakes, canals, borrow pits, rice fields, and rivers where emergent plant cover ranges from extensive to minimal (Bannor and Kiviat 2002). In the western United States, this species is found in freshwater marshes, ditches, and ponds (Cogswell 1977).

The Common Gallinule is a partial short-to-medium-distance migrant (Bannor and Kiviat 2002). This species vacates the northern parts of the breeding range, particularly in eastern North America, where wetland habitats freeze (Ripley 1977, Root 1988b). Census conducted in a coastal impoundment of southern Louisiana showed a decline in individuals from 18,000 in late August to only 1,000 in late November, suggesting either migration or extensive post-breeding dispersal, even where the species lives year-round (Bell and Cordes 1977). This species winters in areas with a frost-free period of at least 240 days (Root 1988b). The Hawaiian Common Gallinule is a highly sedentary species (Bannor and Kiviat 2002).

In northern Florida, the Common Gallinule migrates in the spring mainly from March 31 through April 29 based on migrant tower kills (Stevenson and Anderson 1994b), and in coastal Mississippi numbers increase by mid-April (Turcotte and Watts 1999). This species arrives mid-April through late May in Wisconsin (Robbins 1991), and in Ohio from April 15-20 through mid-May (Peterjohn 1989b). The Common Gallinule begins to arrive in south-eastern Pennsylvania in mid-April with stragglers continuing to arrive through June (Miller 1946d). The recorded early dates of spring arrival for 18 northern states and provinces ranged from March 17 to May 2 (Bent 1926).

In the eastern United States, fall migration occurs from early September to mid-October in Wisconsin (Robbins 1991), from September through mid-October in Ohio (Peterjohn 1989b); and from mid-August through mid-October in south-eastern Pennsylvania (Miller 1946d). Stragglers can also linger through till November in Wisconsin, Ohio and Pennsylvania (Bannor and Kiviat 2002). The recorded late dates of fall departure birds for 16 northern states and provinces is from 20 September to November 29 (Bent 1926). Farther south, the numbers of Common Gallinules decline by early November in coastal Mississippi (Turcotte and Watts 1999), and in Florida, fall tower kills extend mainly from September 8 through to December 25 (Stevenson and Anderson 1994b).

In the eastern United States the Common Gallinule winters primarily along the Gulf and Atlantic Coastal Plains from Texas to south-eastern Virginia (Root 1988b). Most migrate to Florida; the Orlando Christmas Bird Count of 1978 recorded 1,042 individuals (Root 1988b, Stevenson and Anderson 1994b). There have been banded Common Gallinules recovered in Florida that originated from as far east as New York and Ontario, and as far west as Iowa and Missouri, and as far south as Louisiana, suggesting funnelling of the eastern populations into Florida for the winter (Stevenson and Anderson 1994b). Three birds banded in United States and Canada were recovered outside the mainland of North America: with one banded in Delaware and shot in Haiti, one banded in Michigan and shot in Cuba, and one banded in Ontario caught in Bermuda (Greij 1994, Bannor and Kiviat 2002). Trans-Gulf migration by some individuals in spring from Yucatán Peninsula to Louisiana, but it is unknown if the reverse occurs in fall (Bullis *et al.* 1952). Outside Canada and the United States, the Common Gallinule becomes more common most likely due to the arrival of wintering birds in Mexico from October through to March (Howell and Webb 2010). In Bermuda, the Common Gallinule is a common fall migrant recorded from August 26 through to November 30 with most observed in the month of September, and most wintering birds depart by late April (Amos 1991). In the western United States, many populations of the Common Gallinule are non-migratory, including those living as far north as the Great Salt Lake marshes of northern Utah (Walters and Sorenson 1983, Greij 1994). There is

a seasonal altitudinal movement in Arizona and New Mexico, where individuals winter below 1,000 m (Greij 1994).

In southern and south-western states, the Common Gallinule winters in a variety of marshes, swamps, canals, ponds, and lakes. In coastal Texas, this species used 23 of 83 wetland types, with a preference for aquatic-bed rooted vascular and emergent persistent types of the palustrine subclass (Anderson *et al.* 2000a). The Common Gallinule was found to occur where Cordgrass (*Spartina spartinae*) dominates some wintering habitats in Louisiana (Meanley 1969a).

The western populations in North America of the Common Gallinule are thought to be more sedentary than the eastern populations, with some altitudinal and intraregional movements (Bannor and Kiviat 2002). Within some western areas such as southern California, this species occurs year-round at some locations, but only summers or winters at others; areas in which species winters, but does not breed in southern California, include coastal and less frequently inland wetlands (Garrett and Dunn 1981). The central and eastern populations of the Common Gallinule generally winter in coastal areas from North Carolina to Texas, some moving southward to Panama, West Indies, and possibly South America (Taylor 1998). There are small numbers that winter irregularly within breeding range in central and eastern North America from Texas and the Carolinas north in decreasing numbers to southern Canada (American Ornithologists' Union 1998a). Of note, Common Gallinules from the southernmost populations in South America apparently move northward in the austral winter to some extent (Sick 1993).

Outside the Common Gallinule's established range, the species is a casual vagrant west to Farallon Islands off central California (Small 1994), in southern Idaho, western Montana, Wyoming, southern Manitoba, central Ontario, eastern Quebec, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward I. (DeSante and Ainley 1980, Godfrey 1986, American Ornithologists' Union 1998a).

Along the west coast north of California, the Common Gallinule is an accidental vagrant with only a handful of records likely due to the more sedentary nature of western populations. In Oregon there are at least 12 accepted records by the Oregon Bird Records Committee (OFO 2012). The Common Gallinule is an accidental vagrant in British Columbia with a single well studied and photographed individual found at Iona Island Regional Park in Richmond (Hunn and Mattocks 1981, Weber 1982, Campbell *et al.* 1990b).

Identification and Similar Species

The identification of the Common Gallinule is covered in all standard North American field guides. This is a medium-sized species measuring 32–35 cm in length, with a wingspan of 53 cm,

weighing 310–456 grams (Sibley 2000, Bannor and Kiviat 2002, Dunn and Alderfer 2011). The male is larger and heavier than the female often by as much as 100 g (Bannor and Kiviat 2002), and this difference is sometimes noticeable in the field. In the context of British Columbia, there is no other species that looks like the Common Gallinule making identification fairly straightforward.

The following identification information on the Common Gallinule is taken from Bannor and Kiviat (2002) unless otherwise stated.

Adult are essentially all blackish, paling to dark gray on the upper back, sides, and flanks, and having scapulars, wings, and rump brownish. In breeding adults, bill and frontal shield scarlet with an orange-yellow bill-tip. In non-breeding adults, the bill and shield colors are significantly duller, and the shield is also smaller (Petrie 1988). The bill and large frontal shield extends to just over the front of the cinnamon-Brown or maroon coloured eyes and is usually squared or truncate on the rear margin. There are prominent white stripes along the top of the sides and the flanks. The lateral undertail coverts are white, and are divided by black median undertail coverts. Both sexes appear to look similar to each other. Birds in adult plumage similar throughout the year, but the chin and throat, and other underparts become paler-gray and the bill and frontal shield become duller during the non-breeding season when birds are in Basic plumage.

Juveniles are brownish-gray overall, duller than adults and much paler on the underparts, paling to whitish on the belly. Birds at this age also show a pale buffy-white supraloral line. The white flank-stripe and under tail-covert pattern is similar to adult. The bill and frontal shield is a dull greenish brown. The legs are a dull olive-gray.

The Common Gallinule may be confused with American Coot (*Fulica americana*) and Purple Gallinule (*Porphyrio martinica*). Compared with Common Gallinule, the American Coot is stockier and rather dumpy in appearance, less buoyant while swimming, and lacks the white stripe on the flanks, and also has a stouter whitish bill, as well as large lateral lobes on the toes. The Purple Gallinule is typically found walking on vegetation rather than swimming, and has all-white undertail coverts in all plumages, and lacks the white stripe along the flanks, but beware of the occasional Common Gallinule with an indistinct stripe. The feathering at the sides of the bill on a Purple Gallinule is nearly straight in a vertical line. The Common Gallinule has such feathering projecting at an angle. Adult Purple Gallinule has deep blue on the head and underparts, with greenish on the upperparts, and has a bluish base to the longer, more rounded or pointed frontal shield.

Occurrence and Documentation

In British Columbia, the Common Gallinule is an accidental vagrant with only 1 record of an adult found by the late Brian Kautesk, and was seen and photographed by others at the Iona Island Sewage Ponds in Richmond from May 26-June 3, 1981 (Hunn and Mattocks 1981, Weber 1982, Campbell *et al.* 1990b). There are colour photographs of this bird on file with the Royal BC Museum under the label photo 727 (Campbell *et al.* 1990b). There are 2 other reports for British Columbia that remain hypothetical. Campbell *et al.* (1990b) mentions 2 hypothetical records from the interior of the province that lack information to be considered valid and are therefore excluded in this species account.

The timing of the single British Columbia record does fit with spring overshoot migration. Of the 12 accepted records for Oregon, 8 records occurred in May (OFO 2012). It is unclear where these records and the provincial record originated since western populations are known to be not very migratory or to move great distances (Bannor and Kiviat 2002). The lack of records from Washington State and to date, a lack of a repeat record for British Columbia, could well point to these records involving birds that came from the southwest and not the south or east. The Common Gallinule is a possible vagrant anywhere in the province, but might not occur again for some time.

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