

Swainson's Warblers nest in the southeastern United States north to southern Ohio, West Virginia, southern Virginia, and southeastern Maryland. Vagrants occasionally wander north of the breeding range in the spring and have been recorded as far north as the New York City area on at least nine occasions, six in the last decade. Although there is an unconfirmed sight record from Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, the Provincetown bird represents the first documented record from Massachusetts and apparently the first for New England. However, in light of the species' regular occurrence in New York in recent years, its appearance here was not unexpected.

REFERENCES

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WHAT A CRAZY BIRD! THE PURPLE GALLINULE

by Dorothy R. Arvidson, Brookline

"Hurry up! He's walking on your car!" And so he was. Within the next few minutes, I scabbled for my camera, focused wildly, and photographed a Purple Gallinule walking delicately on the hood of a car in Falmouth, Massachusetts.

The Hurwitch family had reported to Dick Forster of Massachusetts Audubon that a strange and beautiful bird had been feeding often in the tall grass of their backyard since mid-May. From their description, Dick told them it must be a Purple Gallinule. At Forster's suggestion, I telephoned the family on a weekend that I was visiting a friend in the area and received permission to come by to confirm the identification.

Thus, early on a rainy Sunday morning, May 30, I parked quietly in the Hurwitch driveway but hesitated to walk into the backyard because no one seemed to be stirring. Instead, I strolled around the neighborhood hoping I was not trespassing - the area is closely packed with homes, gardens, fences, and formidable hedges - without sighting any rare birds or even glimpsing any place that seemed a likely habitat for a rail although I knew there was a large pond nearby. I was returning to my car when I heard Barbara Hurwitch calling me and was very lucky indeed to snap three hurried pictures only moments before the bird flew to the top of a dense hedge about ten feet high and dropped out of sight. Barbara told me that the gallinule came into their yard daily at irregular intervals and fed on seeds in the tall grass of the lawn, creating a problem with mowing it. To avoid harming or alarming this lovely creature, they had carefully "cut the grass only a little bit at a time" after searching

to be certain the bird was not present. However, she reported that the gallinule seemed undisturbed by the family's presence or activities such as playing badminton but went on quietly feeding at the edges of the lawn.

This species usually prefers ponds, marshes, and heavily overgrown swampy sites where aquatic insects, spiders, and small frogs are a plentiful source of food, but it may at times wander out upon stream banks and "beyond them to adjacent meadows, even to lawns" (S.D. Ripley, 1977. Rails of the World. Boston: Godine, p.295), where it feeds on grass seeds just as this bird was observed to do.

Although the Falmouth bird was found in such a populated area and was so unshy that it behaved like a pet, it was unbanded and was able to fly easily with long legs dangling. Dick Forster assured me that very probably it was a wild bird, not an aviary escapee, and that Purple Gallinules are noted for their wanderings and unusual behavior or, as he put it, "It's just a crazy bird."

This bird, equal in size to the Common Gallinule, was a beautiful, full-plumaged adult and very similar in coloration



*Purple Gallinule
on hood of car*

Photo by Dorothy Arvidson

to the excellent photograph on the May 1982 cover of American Birds. The head, neck, and entire undersurface were an iridescent, velvety blue which on the head and in shadowed areas deepened to a blackish purple. The back and wings were a deep olive varying in intensity from green to bronze. The undertail coverts, a clean, contrasting white, were strikingly displayed as the bird flirted its tail and crouched to take off for the shrubbery. The bill was a strong red at the base with a bright greenish yellow tip, and the frontal shield was a pale opalescent blue.

On the dull, rainy morning of May 30, what appeared most striking through the camera lens were the long, golden-yellow feet and legs (the three longest toes were as long as the tarsus) which twisted like a ballerina's as the bird moved to and fro on the car hood looking at us and jerking its tail. Despite the large area covered by the long toes that rested almost flat on the surface with the shorter hind toe only slightly arched, the bird was extremely graceful and positioned its feet rapidly without entanglement or overlapping toes. Clearly, the unusual toe span enables the gallinule to distribute its weight over a sufficient area that it can readily find support on a very fragile base. Thus, the Purple Gallinule walks freely on floating plants or debris and forages equally well in the tops of trees, going as high as twenty feet. One unfortunate consequence of this adaptation is that the bird has become a pest in the rice projects of Surinam where the fragile tips of the rice plants are damaged when the birds sit on the blades. In the Wageningen fields, twenty percent Endrin was sprayed by aircraft to destroy them (F.Haverschmidt, 1968. Birds of Surinam. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, p.91).

The breeding range of the Purple Gallinule includes eight of our southeastern states with isolated records from Ohio and Illinois and extends through Mexico, most of the West Indies, and Central and South America as far as northern Argentina. The bird is resident throughout most of this range and has popped up as a vagrant in four Canadian provinces, in an additional twenty-two of our states, in the Falkland and other south Atlantic islands, and even in South Africa. S.Dillon Ripley calls this species a "noted vagrant." Apparently, wandering gallinules often land on ships' decks and are carried far beyond normal range (Ripley, p. 296).

The Purple Gallinule is usually a spring, summer, or fall vagrant in our northeastern maritime region (about three dozen reports since 1968) with a few appearances in winter. What a glorious sight this bird must be on a snow-covered path! First seen in Massachusetts in 1852 in Swampscott, Gallinula martinica has visited our state five times in the last four years: once in winter (Chatham), thrice in fall (Great Meadows N.W.R. and Beverly), and now in spring.

Such a handsome creature must be seen in "living technicolor" to be appreciated, and we must hope that the next Gallinula martinica to visit Massachusetts alights in a public place where all birders may fully enjoy it.