

The Purple Swamp-hen in Cumbria in 1997

Alan Knox, Tim Melling and Roger Wilkinson

on behalf of the British Ornithologists' Union Records Committee

David Quinn



ABSTRACT The evidence suggests that the Purple Swamp-hen *Porphyrio porphyrio* watched and photographed in Cumbria in October 1997 was an escape from captivity rather than a wild vagrant.

The Purple Swamp-hen *Porphyrio porphyrio* (formerly known as the Purple Gallinule) is found naturally from the Mediterranean, through Africa, the Middle East and southern Asia, to Australasia (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996). It is largely sedentary, although some movements are known to take place (summarised in Palmer 1998). It occurs in captivity in Britain and Europe. Over the years, a number of Purple Swamp-hens have been seen in the wild in Britain (Naylor 1996; Evans & Abraham 1998). All have been dismissed as probable escapes from captivity and, indeed, some occurrences have probably not been recorded because of this general view of the unlikelihood of the species occurring naturally. The observation of one at Sandscale Haws, Cumbria, during 23rd-28th October 1997

was taken a little more seriously by some British birders (Gantlett & Millington 1997; Evans & Abraham 1998; Palmer 1998). That individual was originally believed to be an immature of either the *caspius* or the *seistanicus* race (Palmer 1998), both of which are known to wander to some extent from their Caspian and Middle East breeding grounds. It also turned up at a plausible time of year, and its arrival coincided with an influx of Pied *Oenanthe pleschanka* and Desert Wheatears *O. deserti*. In addition, it was (erroneously) reported to be in perfect condition, with no obvious signs of captivity, it was wary, and it stayed for just six days. On the face of it, the Sandstone Haws individual looked like a good candidate whereby Purple Swamp-hen might secure a place in Category A of the British List.

The record was submitted to the British Birds Rarities Committee and, subsequently, to the BOURC. Both committees had no hesi-



This paper is an official publication of the British Ornithologists' Union.

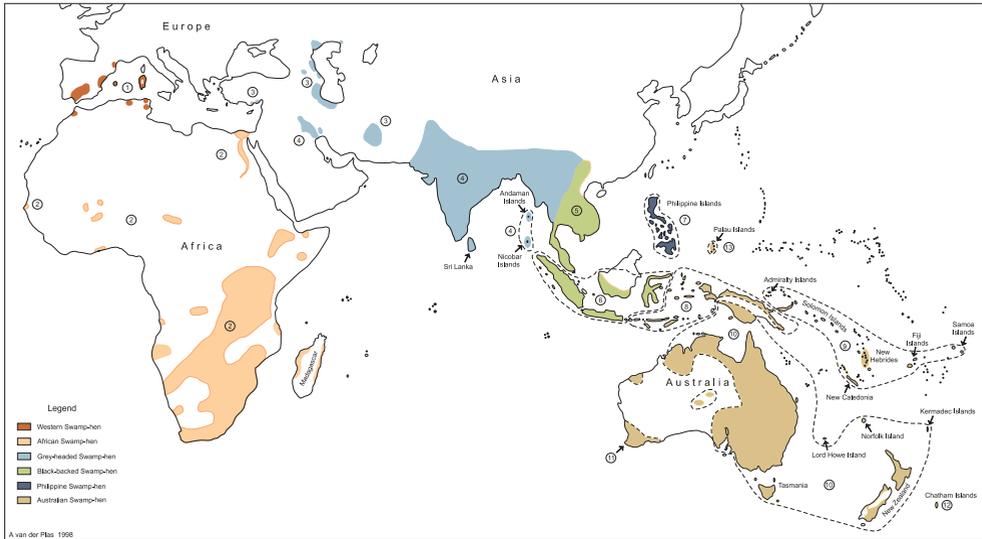


Fig. 1. Breeding ranges of forms of Purple Swamp-hen *Porphyrio porphyrio*, from Sangster (1998), who recognised six separate species: Western Swamp-hen *P. porphyrio*, African Swamp-hen *P. madagascariensis*, Grey-headed Swamp-hen *P. poliocephalus*, Black-backed Swamp-hen *P. viridis*, Philippine Swamp-hen *P. pulverulentus*, and Australian Swamp-hen *P. melanotus*. Numbers denote races recognised by Ripley (1977): 1 *porphyrio*, 2 *madagascariensis*, 3 *seistanicus*, 4 *poliocephalus*, 5 *viridis*, 6 *indicus*, 7 *pulverulentus*, 8 *melanopterus*, 9 *samoensis*, 10 *melanotus*, 11 *bellus*, 12 *chathamensis*, and 13 *pelewensis*. (Reproduced by kind permission of the Editor of *Dutch Birding*.)

tation in accepting the species identification. To determine the likely origin of the bird, and its eligibility for Category A, the BOURC carried out further investigations. The dull colour of the bill and legs pointed to its being a juvenile. More importantly, scattered grey feathers on the thighs and the belly confirmed that it was a young bird. The rather limited extent of the frontal shield supported this ageing, although that feature, and also the leg and bill coloration, does vary between the sexes. Purple Swamp-hens can breed throughout the year, and relating the age of young birds to the breeding season of the previous spring or summer can, therefore, require caution. In this case, ageing of the bird as an immature could have supported the claim of natural vagrancy, as that age group is more likely to wander.

Purple Swamp-hen shows strong geographical variation, with the races falling into six main groups (Ripley 1977). It has recently been suggested that these would be best treated as separate species (Sangster 1998). A study of skins at the Natural History Museum revealed that the Sandpiper bird did not belong to the nominate (western Mediterranean) race or to any of the three

groups from the Far East and Australasia, and that it showed a puzzling mix of features. It most closely resembled the race *madagascariensis* from sub-Saharan Africa and Madagascar, with an isolated population in northern Egypt. Characters indicative of this race included the general rich blue coloration and the greenish sheen on the back and wing-coverts. The brighter, cerulean blue on the sides of the head behind and below the eyes, on the throat and on the neck, and the way in which this contrasted with the very much darker lores, were also compatible with that racial identification. The colour of the dark thighs was readily matched by skins of this race.

The limited extent of the green sheen on the back did not, however, fit *madagascariensis*. To do so, it should have been more extensive and should have continued up towards the base of the neck. Furthermore, although age differences occur, the wing-coverts should have been more contrastingly blue for *madagascariensis*, differing clearly from the green of the back and scapulars.

Some of the characters seemed closer to those of the *poliocephalus* group of races, especially *caspius* or *seistanicus* from the



248. Purple Swamp-hen *Porphyrio porphyrio*, Cumbria, October 1997. Note damaged or missing primaries on the right wing.

Near and Middle East through to northwest India. Among other features, the turquoise colour of the wing-coverts and the pale leg coloration were consistent with this. Many features, however, did not fit those races. In particular, adults of the *poliocephalus* group have pale heads, and this is still apparent, though less obvious, on immatures. Some observers reported a grey cast on the head of the Sand scale bird, but this did not appear in any of the excellent photographs available, and it was assumed to have been a trick of the light. Along with other characters, the contrastingly darker lores of the Sand scale bird appeared to be incompatible with its being either *caspius* or *seistanicus*.

These anomalies prompted us to contact Dr Barry Taylor in South Africa (co-author of Taylor & van Perlo 1998). He checked the skins in Durban Museum and confirmed that the Cumbrian bird showed characters indicative of more than one race. He concurred that the bird most closely resembled the African race *madagascariensis*, but raised several additional points. He felt that the green-tinged flight feathers should have been black with purple-tinged outer webs, while the green of the mantle, scapulars and wing-coverts was also thought to be rather too turquoise for that race. He considered that the legs were rather pale for any age of *madagascariensis*.

The inevitable conclusion was that the

Cumbrian bird did not accord with any known race of Purple Swamp-hen, as previously suggested by Evans & Abraham (1998). Since intermediates between *madagascariensis* and *poliocephalus* are unknown in the wild, it seems more likely that the bird was a hybrid between two forms, so was presumably of captive origin.

The species is kept widely in captivity in the United Kingdom and in continental Europe. Although a number of collections do not identify their birds to subspecies, the majority of recent imports into the United Kingdom have been of the race *poliocephalus*. The European Gruiformes Taxon Advisory Group survey (Brouwer *et al.* 1995) listed one collection in Italy holding *madagascariensis*, indicating that this subspecies has also been traded. The Federation of Zoological Gardens of Great Britain and Ireland, in its bird inventories for 1996 and 1997, reported seven public collections as having Purple Swamp-hens. Private collections, however, are not recorded in that survey. The Foreign Bird Federation Breeding Registers, which cover both zoos and private breeders, indicate that 31 Purple Swamp-hens were reared successfully in captivity during 1992-95. This is a minimum total, as not all collections contribute to these surveys.

Subsequent to the Cumbrian observation, a well-documented escape from Hamerton Wildlife Park was found near Ely in Cam-

bridgeshire. Another individual was also reported to have escaped from Lotherton Bird Gardens, near Leeds, West Yorkshire. Purple Swamp-hens are notorious among aviculturists as having strong bills with which they cut through wire or nylon netting. Even juveniles are considered to be proficient escapologists. The Cumbrian bird was reported at the time to be in perfect plumage, showing no signs of



Steve Young/Birdwatch



Keith Stone

249 & 250. Purple Swamp-hen *Porphyrio porphyrio*, Cumbria, October 1997.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful to the staff of the Natural History Museum for access to skins and library materials. Dr Barry Taylor and Prof. David Parkin provided invaluable advice and assistance. Steve Dudley and BOURC members contributed to the discussion of this record and commented on a draft of this paper. The editors of British Birds wish to thank André

van Loon, Arnoud B. van den Berg and the journal *Dutch Birding* for permission to reproduce fig. 1, taken from Sangster (1998), and Ian Dawson for assistance with references.

References

- Brouwer, K., Smits, S., & Melissen, A. 1995. *The 1994 EEP TAG Survey, Part Two*. 1st edn. EEP Executive Office, Amsterdam.
- del Hoyo, J., Elliott, A., & Sargatal, J. 1996. *Handbook of the Birds of the World*. vol. 3. Barcelona.
- Evans, L. G. R., & Abraham, T. 1998. The Purple Gallinule in Cumbria. *Rare Birds* 4: 41-44.
- Gantlett, S., & Millington, R. 1997. The Purple Gallinule in Cumbria. *Birding World* 10: 399.
- Naylor, K.A. 1996. *A Reference Manual of Rare Birds in Great Britain and Ireland*. vol. 1. Nottingham.
- Palmer, P. 1998. The Purple Gallinule in Cumbria - a new British bird? *Birding World* 10: 463-466.
- Ripley, S. D. 1977. *Rails of the World*. Toronto.
- Sangster, G. 1998. Purple Swamp-hen is a complex of species. *Dutch Birding* 20: 13-22.
- Taylor, B., & van Perlo, B. 1998. *Rails: a guide to the rails, crakes, gallinules and coots of the World*. Robertsbridge.

captivity, but plate 249 by Gary Bellingham clearly shows missing primaries on the right wing.

Conclusion

The characters of the Cumbrian Purple Swamp-hen do not appear to fit well with those of any wild population. The reasons for this are not known, but interbreeding of races in captivity cannot be excluded. The species is kept and bred widely in captivity and has a strong track record of escaping. This bird also showed asymmetrical feather damage that was not consistent with moult. The BOURC considered that the record should be placed in Category E as relating to a likely escape from captivity. In Britain, natural vagrancy for this species continues to be unlikely.

Dr Alan Knox, *Historic Collections, University of Aberdeen, King's College, Aberdeen AB24 3SW, Scotland*

Dr Tim Melling, *RSPB, Westleigh Mews, Wakefield Road, Derby Dale, West Yorkshire HD8 8QD*

Dr Roger Wilkinson, *North of England Zoological Society, Chester Zoo, Upton-by-Chester, Chester CH2 1LH*

