

Purple Swamphen

Porphyrio porphyrio

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Hunter Bird
Observers Club

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Adult Purple Swamphen (photo: Dawn Riggett)

Description

The Purple Swamphen is a large waterhen with a massive red bill and red frontal shield. Adults are black above, including all of their head, and they are purple below. They have long pink/orange legs, and a prominent white undertail. The undertail is readily visible because foraging birds constantly flick their tail upwards, thus revealing all.

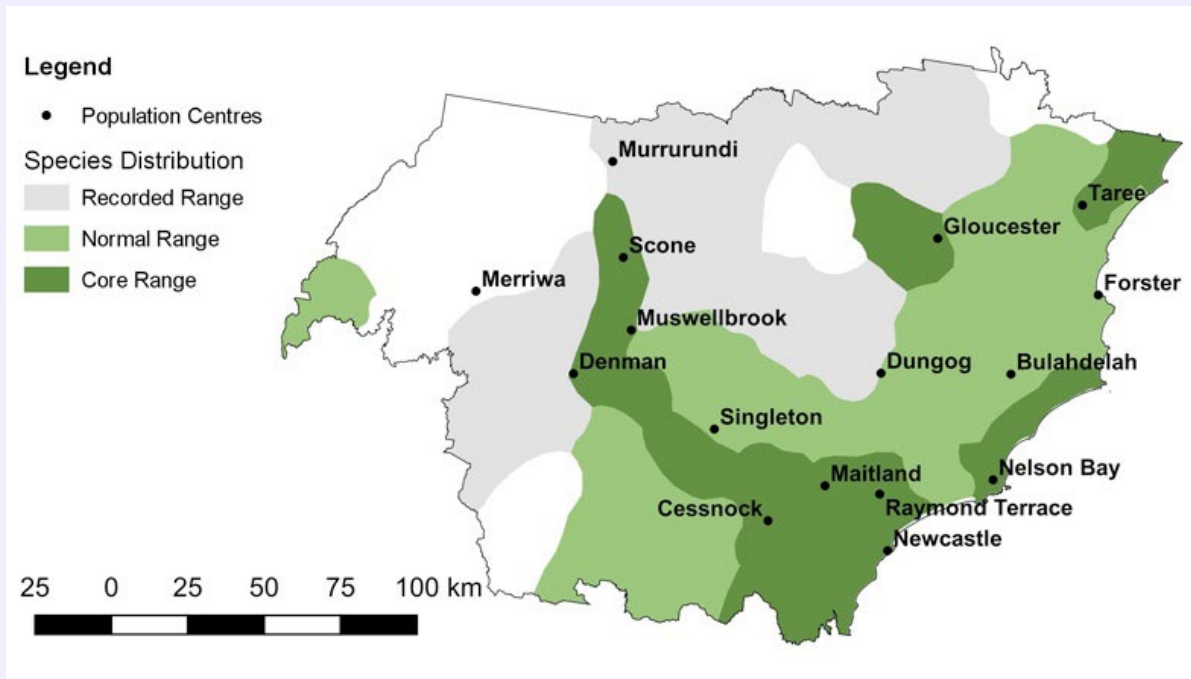
Males and females are indistinguishable. Juveniles lack the red bill and frontal shield and have yellowish legs. Chicks, which are readily seen in the breeding season, are gangly, fluffy black blobs: huge legs (for their size), rudimentary wings, and a white tip to their dark bill.

The Purple Swamphen frequents swamps and lakes, but also many other riparian or estuarine settings. It primarily is a vegetarian (mainly consuming the succulent bases to wetland reeds and rushes). However, it is an omnivore

and an apex forager in its normal habitat and is known to prey upon chicks of other birds..

Regional status

The Purple Swamphen is resident in the Hunter Region. It is quite common at wetlands in the Hunter Valley and in most of the eastern parts of the region. The records in the south-west of the region mainly are from a smallish wetland near the Ulan coal mine.



Distribution map for Wonga Pigeon (map prepared by Dan Williams).

Family Life

The birds' family life has been well-studied, particularly in New Zealand, where it is known as "Pukeko". Although there are territorial pairs, more commonly there are territorial groups (and occasionally, non-territorial flocks form but these are shorter-lived). Communally breeding territorial groups typically consist of 2-7 breeding males, 1-2 breeding females and up to seven non-breeding helpers. All breeding adults court and copulate with each other: homosexuality is frequent. In these large groups, cooperative parental care occurs, and all members of the breeding unit participate in territorial defence.



Juvenile bird; note the absence of red frontal shield and bill, and the paler legs.
(photo: Steve Merrett)



Immature bird (photo: Alan Stuart)

Miscellaneous

In favourable conditions, Swamphen numbers swell, and they sometimes then are treated as a pest species (such as on seabird breeding islands where they feed on seabird chicks) and able to be hunted. New Zealand and Norfolk Island often have allowed birds to be shot (for example, 470,500 birds were shot in New Zealand between 1968 and 1975). Associated with such hunting, there are various recipes for how to cook them. We're not going there for two months in a row!

Sub-species

There is a sub-species in Western Australia (*bellus*) which has a much paler throat and breast (often they have been described as “cobalt” coloured). In eastern Australia, all birds are of the sub-species *porphyrio* (Australasian Purple Swamphen). World-wide, there are numerous other sub-species.

About the name

Purple Swamphen

World-wide there are many sub-species but mostly they have been named as “gallinules”. The term “swamp-hen” appears to have originated in Australia in about the 1840s. Gould in 1848 called our bird the Azure-breasted or Black-backed Porphyrio, but he also noted that people in WA called it the “Swamp-Hen”.

Porphyrio porphyrio

Linnaeus named this genus in 1758; the name derives from the Greek *porphurion* and Latin *porphyria*, both meaning “purple”. At that time, it was a common species in southern Europe; now it is far less common there.



Sub-adult Purple Swamphen (photo: Alwyn Simple)

Design Rob Kyte at Conservation Matters 0420 821 460 **Text** by Alan Stuart based on information mainly sourced from • HBOC's Hunter Region annual bird report series • Volumes 1-7 of HANZAB (the Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds) • Bird in the Hand (ABSA information sheet series) • Ian Fraser & Jeannie Gray (2013). Australian Bird Names. A Complete Guide.

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