

Purple Gallinules Hatch Young at Mermet Lake

by Frank K. Bennett

On 11 July 1998, I was taking my wife, Myra, for a morning drive around Mermet Lake in extreme southern Illinois to see the American lotus in full bloom, when I decided to stop at the second pulloff to snip a flower. As I began driving away, Myra, a non-birding spouse by her own admission, commented that she saw a "black bird with an orange beak and legs" jump off the top of some of the lotus pads near some buttonbush. She then demonstrated how the bird walked.

"Could it be?" I thought as I raced back. To my amazement, it was a Purple Gallinule (*Porphyrio martinica*) — and a life bird for me! Not a bad trade — one lotus flower for one life bird.

On 12 July, I arrived at 6:30 a.m. to enjoy an adult gallinule in breeding plumage making short flights from the buttonbush to the lotus. About 30 minutes later, my father arrived and we watched the gallinule land on top of the lotus pads. We also heard another gallinule clucking. I returned at 6 p.m. that day to meet with co-worker and fellow birder, Lester Barger and his wife. For 15 minutes, we saw no gallinule. We then played a tape of three gallinule clucks, and the bird instantly appeared. Another gallinule then emerged from the buttonbush. Lester and I then discovered there was a nest in the buttonbush. We also heard two different gallinules calling from farther out in the lake.

We enjoyed watching the brilliantly intense green, blue, yellow, and red colors of the adult, wondering how it camouflaged itself so well in the wetlands.

On 13 July, we noticed four chicks, which appeared to be about one-half the size of the adults, in the nest. On 14 July, we saw one gallinule sitting on

the nest while another flew back and forth into the lotus returning with food in its bill for the young. The chicks were fed approximately every five minutes.

On 15 July, Lester Barger and I saw two solid black downy chicks. Each had a bill that was red near the face, black in the middle, and then white at the tip. The legs appeared black, although the poor lighting made it difficult to determine the color.

We found two chicks still in the nest on 16 July, and two more in the buttonbush branches. The adults were nearby making soft clucks. The next day, I arrived to find the nest empty, but saw no chicks.

By this time, the word had gotten out across the state that the Purple Gallinule had successfully hatched young in southern Illinois. On 18 July, birders from Urbana and Chicagoland arrived to glimpse the Purple Gallinules; everyone who came got at least one decent look.

I continued making trips after that to check on the status of the gallinules. Some hot evenings, I did not see the birds. Sometimes in the early morning, I heard the gallinules clucking and kicking in the breeding area.

One of my last views of the gallinules that summer was on 26 July 1998 from 8 to 9 a.m. when it was raining lightly. I saw three plain dark-backed chicks emerge from the buttonbush with an adult following them.

Another pair of Purple Gallinules successfully hatched young in 1998 as well.

Also, an adult Purple Gallinule was found injured in Jersey County on 28 June 1998. It died on 30 June (fide Frank Holmes) and since has been deposited at the Illinois State Museum (fide Vernon Kleen).

Bohlen (1989) lists the Purple Gallinule as a rare vagrant and very rare summer resident in southern Illinois. In 1989, two-thirds of the state records were for spring and most were found in marshes and at lakes, although some were seen in backyards. A dead Purple Gallinule was found in Lake County on 10 April 1997 at a forest preserve district golf course (Hurley 1997).

The only breeding records for this bird in the state of Illinois exist at Mermet Lake, which provides a shallow lake border habitat with emergent and floating vegetation, including the American lotus upon which the birds walk. Two downy young Purple Gallinules found at Mermet Lake in 1964 represent the first nesting evidence of this species for Illinois. A nest with eight eggs was found at Mermet Lake on 19 June 1973 (Bohlen).

The Purple Gallinule was on the Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board's list of endangered birds from 1978 to 1994, but then was removed in 1994 on the basis that its breeding status in Illinois appears to be that of a vagrant, with Illinois occurring substantially north of its typical breeding range (Herkert 1995).

Literature Cited

Bohlen, H. D. 1989. The birds of Illinois. Indiana University Press, Indianapolis and Bloomington, IN.

Herkert, J. Endangered and Threatened Birds of Illinois: An Overview of the Species and Their Habitats. Meadowlark 4:42-47.

Hurley, M. Purple Gallinule on Lake County Golf Course. Meadowlark 6:140.

— Frank K. Bennett
2726 Teague Hill Rd.
Grantsburg, IL 62943