

FEATURES

The Waterman – Beauty of the marshes

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A thing of beauty is a joy to behold and if you happen to be near any freshwater area, such as a marsh or pond, you'll certainly enjoy seeing this stunning bird. Today, we highlight the gorgeous purple gallinule (Porphyrio martinicus).

What makes this bird so beautiful? Imagine a blue chicken. The waterman, as it is known in rural areas, is primarily purplish-blue and green in its appearance with boldly contrasting yellow legs and white tail feathers. Equally contrasting is the light blue area (known as the frontal shield) just above its red beak. The overall combination of colours makes for a stunningly attractive bird. Of course, the younger birds need to remain camouflaged from predators and so are drab brown.

But despite its beauty, not many people know about the purple gallinule. This might have a lot to do with its choice of habitat. Gallinules favour densely vegetated freshwater areas where they can quickly hide if they perceive a threat. If you take an early morning drive through suitable habitat,



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such as the former rice-producing areas of the South Oropouche Lagoon, you are likely to see several gallinules perched atop the marsh plants (only to stealthily retreat into cover on your approach).

Sometime they fly awkwardly, low to the ground, from bush to bush. If the bush happens to be on the other side of a road, this sometimes puts gallinules in the path of oncoming traffic and it is not uncommon to see the occasional roadside corpse as a result. But don't let these weak, short flights fool you - when gallinules set out to fly longer distances they are quite capable. This has helped the purple gallinule to establish a presence from Florida right down to Argentina. If you cannot see them, you are likely to tell there



The Purple Gallinule or Waterman

are gallinule about by their curious calls which could be described as a nasal clucking (sound is a useful way for animals that live in dense vegetation to keep in contact with one another). The gallinule's diet of seeds and water plants means it is usually never far from vegetation. The waterman's vegetarian diet, unfortunately, sometimes results in it going after the farmer's garden for more exotic fare such as ochro, bodi or plantains.

Why are they so cautious? Such a plump bird makes for an attractive target and gallinules are regularly hunted during the open season (and occasionally poached during the closed season). In times gone by gallinules were even con-

sidered an agricultural pest and large numbers were killed. Thankfully, this mass culling has since ended.

Besides the waterman, Trinidad and Tobago is home to two other species of gallinule. The common moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) is very similar in shape and size but is dark slate grey. Unlike the waterman, it is often seen swimming like a duck and can be found in similar habitats throughout the country. The other gallinule is the ultra-secretive azure gallinule (*Porphyrio flavirostris*), which is a bit smaller than the purple gallinule and is light blue in colour. This species is rarely detected and only reliably seen in the eastern

rice growing districts such as Kernahan and Plum Mitán (occasional sightings have been made elsewhere on both islands). While the gallinules populations are robust at the moment, they are vulnerable to one major threat – habitat loss. Old rice lagoons, swampland and other marshlands across our country are slowly being backfilled in the name of “development”. These birds depend entirely upon these areas to survive and the continual loss of freshwater wetlands will place significant pressure on the populations of waterman and other wildlife that utilise this ecosystem. As a nation we need to ensure that these habitats are preserved so that future generations may continue to experience this true beauty of the marshes.

For more information on our natural environment, contact the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists' Club at admin@ttfnc.org or visit our website at www.ttfnc.org and our Facebook or YouTube pages. The club's next monthly meeting will be held today at St Mary's College, Port-of-Spain. Lecture: The Stick Insects of TT by Avion Phillips.



THREATENING CALLS/TEXT MESSAGES OR STOLEN PHONE?

Have you received threatening/harassing telephone calls or text messages?

- » Record the date, time and telephone number (if visible) of the phone calls. Text messages should be kept and saved. For safe keeping you may consider forwarding the messages to a trusted person.
- » Visit the Police Station nearest to you and report the matter.

According to Section 30A (1) (a) of the Offences Against the Person (Amendment) (Harassment) Act, harassment of a person “includes alarming the person or causing the person distress by engaging in a course of conduct such as” ...”making contact with the person, whether by gesture, directly, verbally by telephone, computer, post or in any other way” carried out on an least two occasions.

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