

The American Purple Gallinule, *Porphyryla martinica* on Ascension and St. Helena Islands

by Storrs L. Olson

Received 22nd March 1972

Recently in this journal (Olson, 1971, *Bull. Brit. Orn. Cl.*: 90-92) I referred a record of an immature *Porphyryla* from Ascension to the African species *alleni* and discussed the occurrence of members of this genus on islands in the South Atlantic. Since then, new information has come to light which casts doubt on my previous identification of this individual and adds a new species to the vagrant faunas of Ascension and St. Helena.

In the summer of 1971 I was again in the South Atlantic, spending six weeks on St. Helena and an additional two weeks on Ascension, mostly in search of fossil birds. On St. Helena I found the African race of the Common Gallinule (*Gallinula chloropus meridionalis**) to be an abundant resident of the marshy vegetation in Fisher's Valley and other suitable habitats around the island. In pursuit of specimens of this species on 10th June 1971, I flushed and collected an immature *Porphyryla* from a growth of wild yams in the small stream running through the upper part of Fisher's Valley. Upon picking up the bird I discovered that it was the American species, *martinica*, rather than the African *alleni* that I would have expected. The specimen, now in the U.S. National Museum of Natural History, is a female with the following measurements: culmen from nostril, 16.0; culmen from posterior of shield, 40.8; wing (chord), 179; tarsus, 64.2; middle toe without claw, 60.5; tail, 73.3 mm.

Later, on Ascension on 22nd July, I was shown a caged bird that had been captured a month previously inside one of the storage sheds at English Bay. This was also an immature *Porphyryla martinica*. The bird was emaciated (no small wonder considering its prolonged diet of bread and water) but I obtained from it the following measurements: culmen from shield, 37; wing (chord) (worn), 160; tarsus, 60 mm; and returned the bird to its captors advising them of a more suitable fare for their charge. Mr. Dave Gallop kindly photographed the specimen for me.

I now believe that the dim photograph of a *Porphyryla* from Ascension that I discussed before (*op. cit.*) is probably of *martinica* rather than *alleni*, and that its wing formula may be attributed to wear. Regardless, there are now definite records of both *martinica* and *alleni* from Ascension and St. Helena. Because of the similarity of the immatures, previous records of this genus from either island not substantiated by specimens may be equivocal. Immature *alleni* may be distinguished from *martinica* by its smaller size, usually scaly dorsal pattern, and, in unworn plumage, by the primary formula.

*There has been some confusion regarding the correct subspecific epithet for the African race of *Gallinula chloropus*. The names *meridionalis* and *brachyptera* have both been used, based on *Stagnicola meridionalis* and *S. brachyptera* of C. L. Brehm (1855, *Der vollständige Vogelfang*: 331). Mackworth-Praed and Grant (1935, *Ibis*: 443) reviewed this situation and concluded that despite the discrepancies in Brehm's descriptions, there was no doubt that in both instances he was referring to the species *Gallinula chloropus* and that therefore *meridionalis* (Brehm 1855) was the correct name (presumably on the basis of line priority). The case is somewhat less equivocal than that, however, as the name *meridionalis*, with an identical description, dates back to 1831 (C. L. Brehm, *Handbuch der Naturgeschichte aller Vogel Deutschlands*: 707) and therefore has 24 years priority over *brachyptera*. This last reference has probably been overlooked because of its great rarity. Bangs (1900, *Auk*: 128) says that only 200 copies were printed.

The prevailing winds on both St. Helena and Ascension are strong south-east trades blowing from the direction of Africa. Other vagrants to both islands are of a distinctly African, or at least Old World, nature. At least two of the endemic birds of St. Helena, the living plover *Charadrius sanctaehelena*, and an extinct species of hoopoe (Olson, MS), are of certain African origin. How then is the presence of an American rallid on these islands explained? Two hypotheses come to mind. I assume to begin with that vagrant rallids are transported on the wind and for the most part have little choice of direction. First, it may be that some *P. martinica* are picked up in the westerly winds from South America that supply Tristan da Cunha with its regular influx of gallinule vagrants and that some of these individuals continue to the proximity of the western coast of Africa where they are in turn picked up by the south-easterly trades and blown back out to St. Helena and Ascension. Another consideration, however, is that the trade wind layer is shallow and extends to an altitude of perhaps no more than 1,000 or 1,500 feet. This condition at St. Helena is discussed by Murphy (1936, *Oceanic Birds of South America*: 178). Meteorological crews who were launching weather balloons on Ascension informed me that there too, the trade winds extended to no more than 1,500 feet. It is possible then that *P. martinica* might be carried to Ascension and St. Helena by westerly winds that lie above the trade wind layer. Although the surface winds are unquestionably of paramount importance in the avian colonization of oceanic islands, the case of *P. martinica* shows that at least one species may not always be bound to their direct influence.

I wish once again to thank the Smithsonian Institution, the U.S. Air Force, and my many friends in the South Atlantic, all of whom assisted me. George E. Watson helped in many ways and commented on the manuscript.

Notes on the Yellow-billed Tern *Sterna superciliaris*

by F. Haverschmidt

Received 8th February 1972

The Yellow-billed Tern is a small tern strikingly similar to the Little Tern (*Sterna albifrons*) but easily identified by its stouter bill which is wholly yellow in the breeding plumage. It occurs in South America east of the Andes from Colombia to northern Argentina. In this general area its distribution overlaps with that of the Little Tern during the non-breeding season of the latter species but while *albifrons* is confined to the seacoast, *superciliaris* is mostly a strictly freshwater species (Murphy 1936, Hellmayr & Conover 1948, Fisher & Lockley 1954, Meyer de Schauensee 1966, Watson 1966). However, this difference of habitat is not so clear cut as is generally stated, as in Surinam, where no species of tern has been found nesting, I observed all through the year great numbers of immature *superciliaris* on the seacoast, fishing at sea or resting in flocks on sandbanks and mudflats among Common Terns *S. hirundo*, Royal Terns *S. maxima*, Cayenne Terns *S. sandvicensis eurygnatha*, Little Terns *S. albifrons* and Large-billed Terns *Phaetusa simplex*. I have collected several out of flocks along the coast; starting in the west near Nickerie one sp. on 15th June 1953, and three on 9th June 1954; near Coronie two sp. on 1st August 1953, two on 13th, 14th July 1953 and three on 26th May 1966; and near Gandoe one sp. on 23rd July 1967. All these birds were immature. It is equally numerous on the brackish lagoons behind the coastline and it was present all through the year on a lagoon at Maass-troom plantation (Commewijne Dist.) where I obtained a series of specimens.