

Birds of marsh and open water. Most are black, brown and purple-blue. Sexes alike. Wings short and broad. The bill extends onto their forehead as a shield, usually with diagnostic colour. Their strong legs and long toes aid walking on floating vegetation. Toes may be lobed (coots) for specialised swimming. They run well, walk with flicking tail, exposing a white undertail, and swim with bobbing head.

BLACK-TAILED NATIVE-HEN *Gallinula ventralis*

Rare Australian vagrant

35 cm, 400 g. Similar in size and shape to Dusky Moorhen but more upright stance with tail held cocked. Olive brown above, slate grey below, with prominent white pear-shaped spots on the flanks. Tail and undertail black; tail flicked constantly. Shield, upper bill and bill tip green, lower bill orange; eye yellow; legs brick red. **Habitat:** Feeds on dry land near freshwater wetlands. [Sp 161]



RAILS, GALLINULES and COOTS Rallidae

About 140 species, of which 8 breed in New Zealand. Midden evidence shows that 8 other endemic species became extinct between the arrival of Maori, and European settlement, and the Chatham Island Rail *Rallus modestus* became extinct in about 1900. Two other species are vagrants to New Zealand, and a Corncrake *Crex crex* was reputedly killed near Nelson in 1865, but this record has not been officially accepted.

The rails are mainly aquatic birds, all capable of swimming well. In New Zealand, they range in size from the small Marsh Crake to the large flightless Takahe. Apart from the Pukeko and Weka, rails and crakes are secretive birds, usually skulking in freshwater swamps, and estuarine mangroves and reedbeds. On some mammal-free islands, however, they live on the forest floor. Rails have slim bodies that help them move through dense vegetation, moderately long powerful legs with long unwebbed toes that help them walk in wetlands, a short tail, which is flicked up and down as they walk or swim, and short broad wings. Apart from the flightless Weka and Takahe, rails have low, laboured flight by day, but at night they fly

higher and show good ability to colonise isolated islands. Island forms tend to become flightless.

The two species of gallinule breeding in New Zealand, the Takahe and the Pukeko, are believed to represent two invasions from Australia of the cosmopolitan Purple Swamp-hen *Porphyrio porphyrio*; the Takahe arrived several million years ago, and the Pukeko much more recently. Typical of ancient New Zealand birds, the Takahe has become larger and flightless.

The gallinules and coots have a bony frontal shield extending from the bill to cover the forehead. The legs of coots are quite short, and the toes have lobes of skin that help them swim.

Most species nest solitarily, but Pukeko form groups and several females can lay in the same nest. The cup-shaped nest is generally well concealed in dense swamp vegetation or among *Carex* clumps; however, coots construct an exposed floating platform attached to raupo or rushes. The downy young are capable of walking, running and swimming within days of hatching.

Reading: Ripley, S.D. 1977. *Rails of the World*. Toronto: M.F. Feheley.

161. BLACK-TAILED NATIVE-HEN *Gallinula ventralis* Plate 37

Size: 35 cm, 400 g

Distribution: Breed only in Australia. They are widespread and highly nomadic, moving inland to breed following heavy rain and dispersing back towards the coast in drier spells. They are vagrants to New Zealand, with at least five records: Colac Bay, South-

land (June 1923); Tukituki River, Hawke's Bay (May 1957 to mid-1958); Karamea (August–November 1984), lower Waikato (May 1986) and Lake Hood, Ashburton (August 2002).

Reading: Brathwaite, D.H. 1963. *Notornis* 10: 228–233.