

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.

DUSKY MOORHEN *Gallinula tenebrosa*

Rare Australian vagrant

37 cm, 500 g. Like a Coot but wings olive brown, shield orange-red, bill red with a yellow tip, and undertail dark with white sides; legs green with red at 'knee' joint. Immature browner; bill varying from greenish yellow to brown. Wings project high above tail when swimming. Common call a loud explosive 'prurk'.
Habitat: Weedy shallows or edge of reedbeds of freshwater wetlands, sometimes on nearby pasture.

[Sp 162]



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.

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Plate 37

Size: 37 cm, 500 g

Distribution: Breed in southern Western Australia, in the eastern states of Australia (excluding Tasmania) and in New Guinea. They are moderately nomadic, with some

heading inland to breed following heavy rains. A single vagrant has been recorded in New Zealand, at Lake Hayes, near Arrowtown (August–October 1968).

Reading: Barlow, M.L. 1969. *Notornis* 16: 81–84.