

Common Gallinule or Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

The Common Gallinule (moorhen in British English) is an uncommon to fairly common resident of freshwater marshes in the coastal lowland. It favors areas with about an equal mix of emergent vegetation and open water. It frequents coastal wetlands if they are only slightly brackish but avoids salt water. It is nonmigratory in California but disperses occasionally; the atlas revealed the species to be a rare winter visitor outside its breeding range, at elevations up to 3500 feet.

Breeding distribution: In San Diego County, the Common Gallinule is strongly concentrated in the northwest, in the valleys of the Santa Margarita and San Luis Rey rivers and in the coastal lagoons. In the north county's coastal wetlands, numbers are highest in lagoons lacking tidal influence, especially at the mouth of San Mateo Creek (C1; up to seven on 5 July 1997, P. D. Jorgensen) and in Buena Vista Lagoon (seven in the west basin, H5, 10 August 1999, M. Freda; 15 in the east basin, H6, 25 July

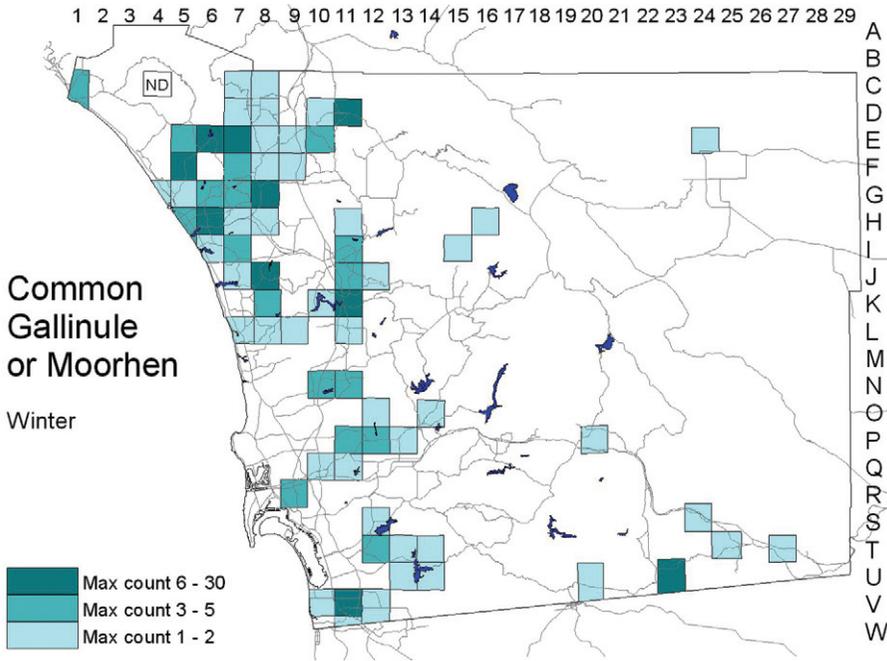


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

1999, L. E. Taylor, including young all these dates). At a few places a short distance inland the gallinule is fairly common, with up to 10 on O'Neill Lake (E6) 29 July and 21 August 1997 (P. A. Ginsburg), 12 on sewage ponds in the Santa Margarita River valley, Camp Pendleton (F5), 26 June 1999 (R. E. Fischer), and 13 at La Costa Country Club (J7) 10 May 2000 (C. C. Gorman).

Farther south, where ponds are fewer, the gallinule is scarcer and more scattered. Our only count during the breeding season of more than four individuals in central or southern San Diego County was of six along the Sweetwater River between Bonita and Sweetwater Dam (T12) 19 July 2001 (T. W. Dorman). Our only sites for the gallinule east of the coastal lowland were at 3300 feet at Sunshine Summit (D17; two at artificial ponds landscaping a mobile-home park, 3 June 2001, P. K. Nelson) and at 4100 feet at Twin Lakes, Cooper Canyon (C18; five, including young, 15 June 2000, M. and B. McIntosh).

Nesting: Common Gallinules nest within a marsh, often on flattened cattails. The nests are

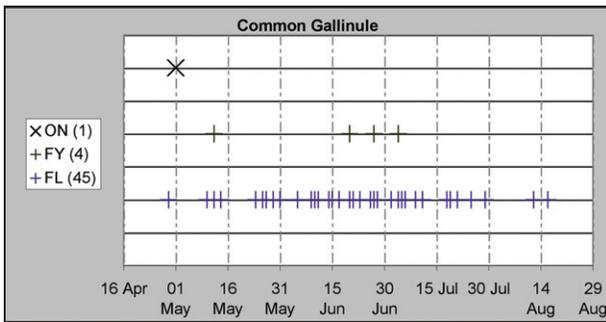


Winter: The gallinule is slightly more widespread in winter than spring and summer, reported in 27 atlas squares in winter but not the breeding season, versus 11 for the reverse. Unusually large numbers have been seen occasionally at O'Neill Lake (up to 30 on 13 December 1999, P. A. Ginsburg). Occasionally numbers at some other spots were notably higher than in the breeding season (up to 10 at the Dairy Mart pond, Tijuana River valley, V11, 18 December 1999, G. McCaskie). At sites where we missed the species in the breeding season, eight at Wilderness Gardens (D11) 7 December 1997 (M. B. Mosher) and eight on San Marcos Creek near Rancho Santa Fe Road (J8) 23 December 2000 (E. C. Hall) were our only

usually screened from view, so atlas observers reported only one (along the San Diego River in Mission Valley, R9, 1 May 1997, H. L. Young). Almost all of our confirmations of gallinule breeding were of young accompanying their parents; the precocial chicks leave the nest soon after hatching. Our dates for chicks ranged from 29 April to 16 August, implying egg laying from early April to early July.

counts of more than four. The gallinule could be an irregular resident at all these additional sites in the coastal lowland, however.

Before our atlas study, there were no winter records of the gallinule in San Diego County outside the coastal lowland, so it was a surprise that we accumulated ten from 1997 through 2002. Five of these were from the southeastern part of the county from Potrero (U20) to Tule Lake (T27), all of single birds except for seven at Campo (U23) 3 February 1999 (D. C. Seals). Other sites were Pamo Valley (I15, two records, O. Carter), near Mesa Grande (H16; one on 15 December 1999, E. C. Hall), and near Descanso (P20; one on 15 February 2002, J. K. Wilson). The only record for the Anza-Borrego Desert is of one on a farm pond at the north end of the Borrego Valley (E24) 20 December 1998 (P. R. Pryde).



Conservation: The gallinule has never been very common in San Diego County; in spite of many disruptions to the county's wetlands, there is no clear trend in the species' numbers here. Most of the sites that it occupies now are not natural.

Migration: The Common Gallinule is a nonmigratory species in California but occasionally disperses outside its usual range. Records of birds crossing atypical habitat are of one found dead near the Palomar Observatory (D15) 31 October 1983 (R. Higson, AB 38:246, 1984) and one found injured on Main Street in Otay (V11) 2 December 2002 (SDNHM 50753).

Taxonomy: *Gallinula c. cachinnans* Bangs, 1915, is the only subspecies of the Common Gallinule in North America. Many others occur in other parts of the species' vast range.