

# HIDE & SEEK

AN ELUSIVE GALLINULE OFTEN CAN SEE YOU BEFORE YOU SEE IT

By Jim Beugez



Photo by Joe Mac Hudspeeth

The “out of sight, out of mind” maxim certainly proves true for gallinules, a family of marsh-dwelling birds that make their homes deep within Mississippi’s secluded coastal waterways and inland swamps. They are so elusive that you might not have even seen one.

“Gallinules are not popular game birds,” says Houston Havens, Waterfowl Program Coordinator for Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries, and Parks (MDWFP). “(That is) largely because they spend most of their time in dense, emergent wetland vegetation and are not as commonly seen as other hunted birds, like doves or waterfowl. Gallinules, which are in the same family as rails, fall under a category called ‘secretive marsh birds.’”

It is not difficult to see why the pursuit of these spindly legged birds has not caught the attention of more hunters. Ducks and geese are much easier to find, and their seasons overlap somewhat in fall and winter. Thanks to their status at the bottom of waterfowl hunters’ wish lists, annual gallinule harvest numbers remain so small, they are statistically insignificant.

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“Gallinule harvest estimates are very low each year,” says Havens, “with the entire United States typically harvesting fewer than 10,000 birds. By comparison, the total estimated duck harvest in the United States typically exceeds 10 million.”

Enterprising hunters might see that as an opportunity to forgo the heavy competition for ducks and head deeper into the cattails and other wetland vegetation. According to posts on online hunting forums, some hunters actually prefer gallinules over ducks, although they generally yield less meat (but more than a coot).

Of course, finding them is the trick. Gallinules prefer emergent marsh wetlands, which are wetlands with tall vegetation standing above the water’s surface. In these areas, aquatic vegetation is present for much of the growing season in most years and usually dominated by perennial plants like lily pads, saltmarsh cordgrass, cattail, and southern wild rice.

“Anywhere this habitat is abundant during the late summer and early fall can be a good place to search for secretive marsh birds,” Havens says. “Shallow, backwater areas around large reservoirs and coastal marsh habitats with dense patches of standing, flooded vegetation are good areas to search for them.”

Photos: (top) Ricky Flynt; (bottom) Bill Stripling/Jackson Audubon Society



## How to locate and identify gallinules

Mississippi's 44-mile southern coastline, as well as its river estuaries and numerous lakes, ponds, and man-made reservoirs, provide the ideal habitat for gallinules. Ross Barnett Reservoir on the Pearl River is the state's largest reservoir, covering more than 32 square miles and featuring extensive marshy wetlands on the northern approach and along Pelahatchie Bay on the southeastern side.

"Although they are migratory birds, their breeding areas typically don't range much farther north than the southeastern United States," Havens says. "Most of Mississippi's gallinules are likely resident breeders (making their homes in Mississippi or nearby states) during the summer, which then migrate farther south in the fall to spend the winter along the Gulf of Mexico."

Two gallinule species make their home in Mississippi marshes: the brightly plumed purple gallinule and the less flamboyant common gallinule. As its

name suggests, a blend of blue and purple makes up the majority of the purple gallinule's plumage, trimmed by hues of green, yellow, and white. The common gallinule is mostly grayish black, often with a streak of white along its wing feathers. Like their flashier cousins, adult common gallinules have a brilliant red smudge between their eyes leading to their beak.

While their non-webbed feet allow them to move swiftly along shorelines, the hen-sized birds walk more gingerly on top of lily pads and through shallow backwater pools, where they crouch near the waterline in search of snails and other invertebrates, insects, and edible vegetation. They move both day and night.

"One of the best methods for hunting gallinules and rails is to use a small, lightweight boat that can be paddled and push-poled through flooded cattails and water lilies," Havens says. "Spotting birds and sneaking within range for a flush and a shot are common hunting methods."

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## When to hunt gallinules in Mississippi

Gallinule hunting seasons in Mississippi are typically in September and December. For 2021, the seasons run Sept. 1-Oct. 4 and Nov. 26-Dec. 31. Shooting hours are from 30 minutes before sunrise to sunset. Based on their typical seasonal movements, the late-summer season is likely best on inland waterways, and winter probably trends better in the marshes along the Gulf Coast, where many gallinules spend the coldest months of the year.

"When Mississippi's gallinule hunting season opens in early September, the weather can be quite warm," Havens notes. "Hunters might encounter similar conditions to a September teal or Canada goose hunt, which can include mosquitos and the potential for active snakes."

Once you arrive at a habitat where you are likely to encounter gallinules, one way to locate them is to listen for their distinctive variety of vocalizations. For such secretive birds, gallinules can be quite chatty and loud, especially in the springtime, which is their mating season. While their main call is a chirpy staccato that begins in short bursts and stretches into longer bleats toward the end, they also cluck, cackle, whinny, and yelp. Their squawks can be low in pitch or high and piercing, and they often offer up a variety of calls in a single calling session.

Photo by Joe Mac Hudspeth



For hunters stepping out to the marshes to pursue gallinules, the daily bag limit for the 2021 season is 15 singly or in aggregate, and the possession limit is 45 singly or in aggregate.

Like other bird and small-game hunting situations, you will have the most success shooting gallinules with a shotgun. The most commonly used type is a 20 gauge loaded with a light-payload such as #7 shot, although heavier-gauge guns can be used with light shot, as well. In Mississippi, lead shot is legal for hunting migratory birds other than waterfowl (e.g. ducks and geese).

While gallinule hunting pressure in Mississippi and throughout their U.S. range remains low, state agencies like MDWFP are working to promote their harvesting. One way hunters can dip a toe into the water with gallinule hunting is to try to bag a few along with the more popular ducks, rails, and coots as the seasonal overlapping allows.

“Gallinule hunting is promoted through educating hunters, first of all, on what the birds are, how to identify them, and where to look for them,” Havens says. “Once hunters learn that there are other game birds legal for harvest while they’re out pursuing teal or Canada geese during the early seasons, they’re more likely to branch out and pursue these lesser-known species.”

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Photo by Paul T. Brown

