

THE FLORIDA GALLINULE NESTING ON LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK.

BY WILLIAM C. BRAISLIN, M. D.

THE previously accepted status of the Florida Gallinule (*Gallinula galeata*) has been that of a rare migrant in the vicinity of New York City. It may, however, be properly classed as a locally common summer resident. It cannot be claimed that its breeding has not heretofore been suspected. The Messrs. W. F. and John Hendrickson, whose ornithological collecting has brought to light a number of valuable bird records, notices of which have appeared in 'The Auk', have had an unverified record of a Gallinule breeding in the Long Island City marshes of several years standing. This record will be referred to presently.

The generous assistance of the Messrs. Hendrickson, first in directing my attention to the unpromising region situated near the center of Long Island City, and likewise their direct coöperation and assistance in my investigation, have made it possible to establish the fact of the Gallinule's nesting here. More than two years ago Mr. William Dutcher courteously directed the attention of the writer to this region as one which might be profitably investigated; he, in turn, having received his information from the Messrs. Hendrickson.

A letter received from Mr. W. F. Hendrickson at that time, in reply to my questions, contains information which led to my exploration of the region. The following is a quotation from it: "In regard to the Florida Gallinule nesting more or less regularly in Long Island City, I beg to say that I believe that at least one pair has nested in the ponds along Judson Avenue and the Long Island Railroad tracks, near the Queens County Court House, for seven or eight years past. I believe also that the Coot has bred there. My brother and I have taken specimens of both Coot and Gallinule, and some years ago my brother found a nest, which contained seven or eight eggs, we believed to be that of the Gallinule, but, for some reason which I have forgotten, the eggs were not taken. My recollection is that I wanted to either see the birds at close range or to shoot one of them as a positive means

of identification, and that we let it go until too late; and since then we have never searched for the nests, although we heard the birds during the spring and summer months. Our attention was first attracted to them by the noise they made. They have a harsh, strident call, and sometimes it could be heard all evening and well into the night. Investigating to ascertain the cause of it, we saw that it was a large, dark-colored bird, which I took to be the Gallinule. I asked my brother about his recollection of the facts, and he said that the principal thing he remembers is this: the birds he saw had a bright red lump on the front of the head. This would indicate that it was the Gallinule. It is certain that the birds seen were either Gallinules or Coots and, as previously stated, I think both have bred there. The ponds in which they breed are deep, with muddy bottom and overgrown with cattails. To seek the nests is dirty exhausting work and I have passed the period of enthusiasm that has led me many times to put on old clothes and literally swim through such places. Therefore the information I give may not be such as would establish a positive record but, as Mr. Dutcher can tell you, my experience is such that you may consider the information as reliable as it could be without the dead birds to prove it. The birds were in the ponds this season (1903), as I heard them on many occasions. The locality frequented by them is thickly populated and you would no doubt be astonished to think birds would breed there. However, we have taken nests of both Sora and Virginia Rails and of the Least Bittern in the same ponds."

In company with the Messrs. Hendrickson as our hosts and Mr. John N. Drake the near by salt marshes were visited in the summer of 1904, and these repaid our investigation in yielding several nests, among them one of the Virginia Rail.

The ponds where the nest was taken were likewise pointed out to us, but not explored at this time. These ponds were originally part of the salt meadows but were laid out into streets and city blocks, years ago, and the streets themselves filled in, so that they stand at a considerably higher level than the marsh land. The ponds thus formed by the intersecting streets, and having no outlets, have become partly filled with rain water so that they are now stagnant muddy pools of nearly, or quite, fresh water. The

bottoms of the ponds are composed of soft, dark, foul-smelling mud which, if not too deep under water, supports a luxurious growth of tall cattail flags. The small leaved, bright green duckweed also finds a congenial habitat here. The bottoms are irregular and not without deep holes, as we afterwards found.

The summer of 1905 proved a propitious one for investigation as it was dryer and the ponds were not so full of water, and were visited several times.

On June 21, 1905, several birds were seen, and, as we supposed, were both Gallinules and Coots, and a flat nest among the flags was located. This was empty. Mr. John Hendrickson also killed for me one of the birds that was swimming in the open water beyond the reeds and this proved to be a Gallinule.

In this specimen, a female, the largest ovule was only the size of a pea and it was believed that some days would have elapsed before she would have laid. Both Gallinules and Coots have been seen later in the season than this in previous years by the Messrs. Hendrickson, so that as yet we were in the dark as to whether the Gallinule or the Coot nested in the ponds.

The loud call of the birds could be heard in the reeds, and as nearly as we could judge each of the several ponds contained a pair of birds. Mr. Erikson, Assistant Curator of birds at the Brooklyn Institute Museum, who visited the ponds on one occasion with me, stated that the call note was apparently exactly similar to that of the Old World Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*). It slightly also suggests to the writer the harsh note of the domestic Guinea fowl.

On July 15, 1905, the ponds were visited in company with Mr. C. G. Abbott, and on examining the nest seen on June 21, it was still untenanted, but a few feet away there had been a fresh nest built. This had apparently been disturbed and disarranged, and just outside it we found the remains of two eggs. Their form was preserved but in one a large hole had been made, and in the other a smaller hole in the side, and much of the contents had been removed. This had probably been the work of some early-morning crow visitors.

The site of the nest was surrounded by water waist-deep, in a clump of reeds. The eggs were preserved. They are the eggs of the Gallinule (*Gallinula galeata*). No birds were observed on this

occasion in the pond referred to, but a number of birds, both old and young, were seen in adjacent ponds. Mr. Abbott explored one particularly fruitful area, and as he has kindly placed his notes at my disposal for use in this paper I make from them the following quotations:

“The spot was a triangle of reeds bounded by two branching railway tracks and an embankment built to carry a road over the marsh. It was not 100 yards in extent in any direction. By getting up on the embankment I could get a view over the whole little pond. I had hardly looked before out into an open space stalked a mother Gallinule with her brood about her, well-grown downy youngsters, black as ink. They were pecking about like a flock of chickens. Hardly had they disappeared among the reeds again than I spied another Gallinule walking leisurely about in the open, her red head [frontal plate] especially conspicuous. On entering the swamp, which was waist deep, a sharp, penetrating note like the squeak of a toy or child’s doll was heard. The sound possessed no ventriloquial qualities and seemed just as close as it was, for, as I peered through the reeds I saw the bird (an adult) skulking leisurely away from me. Thereafter I had opportunities to observe several birds — at least four adults, I think, in this one small pit. I was much surprised at their tameness, for they would allow a remarkably close approach and then only moved slowly away in an insulted sort of manner, stopping very daintily and constantly flirting their tails. Among the reeds their exceedingly broad feet enable the birds to walk upon the duckweed, but in crossing an open space they swam. I saw young birds, however, which being light (those I saw thus were about the size of a Spotted Sandpiper), walk upon the duckweed even over a broad open space. In swimming the bird nods the head at each stroke, and the feet then being hidden, it looks almost exactly like an English Moorhen. The white streaks on the body, however, are quite conspicuous, and give her a (to me) strange appearance. One bird I saw swimming had the wings raised and arched over the back, something after the manner of a male swan. I soon learned that the birds possessed quite a vocabulary, though the commonest notes were the loud *keck* described above (uttered when the intruder approached too near) and a lower, clucking sound.

"I found several nests, all empty, and it was evident that were too late for eggs. The nests were all like the very first one mentioned and composed of compactly matted reeds placed at the base of a little clump of cattails (usually slightly isolated). The beds of the nests were very close to the surface of the water and the structures were not unusually large, as is often the case with rails and gallinules. All the nests I found were close to the edge of open water, not in thick reed beds. It was in precisely such a place that I saw, from a railway train in Jersey City, my only previous Gallinule May 28, 1904."

The observation of these birds at this place which, unless our attention had been directed here, would have seemed more unlikely than the average empty city lot to yield bird "finds".

The evidence of the nest and eggs of the Gallinule collected in the ponds, the continued presence of the birds throughout the spring and summer, and the ultimate appearance of young birds, are conclusive as to the breeding of the Gallinules.

As to the Coots (*Fulica americana*) no positive evidence is as yet established beyond the fact of its presence at a late date, June 28, 1904, at the ponds, as the observation of the Messrs. Hendrickson unquestionably shows. The following quotation from Mr. W. F. Hendrickson's letter establishes probability at least that the Coots as well as the Gallinules nest in the ponds.

"On the morning of the 28th June (1904) while passing the ponds south of my house I saw two Coots. The train was going out of the yard very slowly, when my attention was attracted by a movement at the edge of a small triangular pond, overgrown with cattails. I looked, and saw a Coot standing in shallow water feeding within ten feet of the track, and it never moved as the train passed. A short distance further on I saw another swimming across some open water. The white bills stood out very clearly, and I also saw the white feathers of the wings. My identification is as positive as it could be without having the birds in hand. These birds are undoubtedly nesting there and if you care to come up again to make a search we shall give you whatever aid we can.

"In talking to my brother about the white bills being so noticeable, he said one of the birds seen by him had a very red bill. It

is, therefore, probable that both the Coot and the Gallinule breed in those ponds."

The above, it will be observed, was written by Mr. Hendrickson before our investigations of last summer (1905), and though we were then only able to establish the fact of the breeding of the Gallinules, our search was conducted too superficially and intermittently to detract from the probability that the Coot may also nest here. In fact I am very much inclined to agree with Mr. Hendrickson that the Coot also nests here, at least occasionally if not regularly; since his identification, which I regard as positive, as to its presence there on June 28, in the previous year (1904) at so late a date, must be regarded as significant.

It is hoped that this important question, which can by no means be regarded as settled definitely in respect of the Coot, may be determined during the coming season (1906), since extensive filling in of these flats has already commenced and unless the matter is absolutely decided now, it must hereafter be regarded by ornithologists as an opportunity neglected.

UNPUBLISHED LETTERS OF JOHN JAMES AUDUBON AND SPENCER F. BAIRD.

BY RUTHVEN DEANE.

I.

I TAKE unusual pleasure in presenting the following letters, written by two such prominent characters, who have the love and respect of the ornithological world, and whose life and writings are ever cherished. Another point of interest is the fact that Audubon in his fifty-eighth year formed, through correspondence, the acquaintance of young Baird, then only fifteen years of age, and, appreciating the young man's ardent love for natural history, his energy and marked ability as a field collector and close observer, wrote him letters of encouragement which doubtless had a stimulating influence. These letters, representing certain periods be-