



## Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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*Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife*

## Common Gallinule *Gallinula galeata*

State Status: **Special Concern**  
Federal Status: **None**

**DESCRIPTION:** The Common Gallinule, formerly known as the Common Moorhen, is a duck-like swimming bird about 13 inches long, with a 21-inch wingspan and large, yellow feet that are not webbed. Adults have a black head and neck with a yellow-tipped red bill that extends into a red shield on the forehead. These red areas become brownish in winter. The back is brownish and the under-parts are slate-colored. The tail is short and upturned with white outer undertail coverts and black inner ones. Juveniles are paler and browner with a whitish throat. Both juveniles and adults have white streaking on the flanks that appears as a thin white line when the wings are down. Fledglings are black and downy with the yellow-tipped red bill but lacking the frontal shield. Calls include series of whiny clucks as well as short, squawking screams.

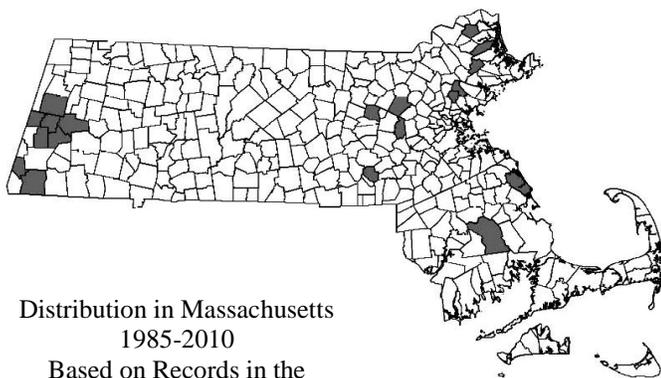
**SIMILAR SPECIES IN MASSACHUSETTS:** The species most easily confused with the Common Gallinule is the American Coot, which is about the same size and is also slate gray, but has a conspicuous white bill with a dark band near the tip. The frontal shield is white with only a small reddish-brown area on the



*Common Gallinule. Photo: Charley Eiseman.*

forehead. Rails are in the same family and may be found in similar habitats, but they generally have a brown body and the *Rallus* species have much longer bills. The white line along the side of the body distinguishes both adult and juvenile Common Gallinules from coots and rails.

**RANGE:** The Common Gallinule and its close relative, the Common Moorhen, are found almost worldwide, but are absent from polar regions and Australia. In North America, the gallinule's breeding range covers most of the eastern US and extends into southern Ontario; birds in this region winter from South Carolina and the Gulf Coast south, or occasionally as far north as New England. Common Gallinules can also be found throughout the year in parts of California, Arizona, and New Mexico, and across much of Mexico. In Massachusetts, they have been found breeding locally across the state, except there are no records from Martha's Vineyard.



Distribution in Massachusetts  
1985-2010  
Based on Records in the  
Natural Heritage Database

*A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan*

## Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

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**HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS:** This species inhabits large, freshwater or brackish marshes. Suitable water bodies are at least a foot deep and have dense cattail beds, and occasionally shrub marsh, adjacent to open water with aquatic bed vegetation.

**LIFE CYCLE / BEHAVIOR:** The Common Gallinule generally keeps to the cover of dense vegetation, wading or dabbling at the edges of open water to feed on grass and sedge seeds, berries, foliage, underwater plants, and duckweed, along with invertebrates such as insects, snails, and worms. It arrives in Massachusetts from the south in late April or May, beginning to nest in May or early June. Nests are typically built over water, occasionally up to 2 feet but usually less than 1 foot high, well concealed by a canopy of surrounding plants. The nest is usually anchored in a clump of vegetation or occasionally built in a shrub, and consists of a bulky but well-made cup of dead cattails, rushes, and stems of other aquatic plants. Typical nest dimensions are 15 inches across and 8 inches tall, with an inside diameter of 8 inches and depth of 3 inches. There is often a ramp leading from the water to the nest. Incomplete nest-like platforms, used for roosting or brooding, may be found nearby. Beginning in late May, the female lays 6-17 (usually around 10-12) brownish, spotted eggs, which are incubated by both parents for 3 weeks. The male cares for the first-hatched chicks while the female incubates the remaining eggs, the last of which hatch by mid-July. The young are precocial, leaving the nest within a day of hatching. They can feed independently after 3 weeks, and can fly in 6-7 weeks, but remain with their parents for a while after this. There may be one or two broods per year. Common Gallinules return to their wintering range in October.

**POPULATION STATUS:** The Common Gallinule is considered globally secure, but is a rare breeder in Massachusetts and is listed as a Species of Special Concern. Twenty-three sites for this species have been verified in the state over the past 25 years; most of these support only single breeding pairs.

**LIMITING FACTORS:** Hunting season for the Common Gallinule has been closed since 1985. Hunting pressure was historically light in Massachusetts and is unlikely to have contributed to its rarity. The loss of substantial amounts of suitable freshwater marsh habitat through drainage and development is likely responsible

for the initial population decline in Massachusetts. Crowley's study documented an inverse relationship between the density of houses within 100 m of wetlands and the likelihood of various marsh bird species occurring there. In addition, NHESP's field surveys find the largest limiting factor to currently occupied sites to be the presence of invasive plants, particularly Phragmites

**MANAGEMENT RECOMMENDATIONS:** Given that habitat loss is the greatest threat to the Common Gallinule, preserving and restoring suitable freshwater marshes is critical to its persistence in Massachusetts. The restoration of current habitat by control of exotic invasive species would remove the current biggest threat to occupied sites. Protection of a 100-m upland buffer around known breeding sites is recommended to reduce adverse effects of disturbance from human activities. Regular inventory for new sites and monitoring of known sites are important for understanding the dynamics of the Common Gallinule populations and planning management where appropriate.

**REFERENCES:**

- Bannor, B.K., and E. Kiviat. 2002. Common Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/685> [doi:10.2173/bna.685](https://doi.org/10.2173/bna.685)
- Crowley, S.K. 1994. Habitat use and population monitoring of secretive waterbirds in Massachusetts. M.S. Thesis, University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Updated 2019

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