

Records of the Purple Swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) from the Czech Republic: a review

Nálezy slípky modré (Porphyrio porphyrio) v České republice: přehled a zhodnocení

Jiří Mlíkovský

Department of Zoology, National Museum, Václavské náměstí 68, CZ-115 79 Praha 1, Czech Republic; e-mail: jiri_mlikovsky@nm.cz

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Standard works on the avifauna of the Czech Republic list four records of the Purple Swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*). My revision of these records shows that the specimen allegedly collected at Jaroslavice in 1957 or 1967 was purchased directly from a bird-keeper, that the 1884 record from Nové Hradky is best treated as an escapee of the nominotypical subspecies *P. p. porphyrio*, and that the records from the Žehuňský pond (1905) and Nesyt pond (1910) are best treated as escapees of *P. p. madagascariensis*. I thus suggest moving the Purple Swamphen from the list of the native avifauna of the Czech Republic to category E (escapes).

Standardní díla o avifauně České republiky uvádějí čtyři nálezy slípky modré Porphyrio porphyrio. Moje revize těchto nálezů ukázala, že pták údajně ulovený roku 1957 nebo 1967 v Jaroslavicích byl zřejmě zakoupen přímo od chovatele, že nález od Nových Hradů (1884) je nejlépe považovat za uprchlíka nominotypického poddruhu P. p. porphyrio a že nálezy z Žehuňského rybníka (1905) a rybníka Nesyt (1910) je nejlépe považovat za uprchlíky poddruhu P. p. madagascariensis. Navrhuji proto, aby slípka modrá byla vyřazena ze seznamu ptačích druhů přirozeně se vyskytlých v České Republice a zařazena do kategorie E (druhy uprchlé ze zajetí).

Keywords: Avifauna, vagrants, escapes, taxonomy, Rallidae, Central Europe

INTRODUCTION

The Purple Swamphen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*) is a conspicuous bird widely distributed in the tropics and subtropics of the Old World (Keith 1986, Taylor 1998). The species was repeatedly recorded from Central Europe (Spitzenberger 1973). The interpretation of these records is difficult, because rails are known to be able to straggle for long distances and may thus be recorded far from their normal range (Taylor 1998), but Purple Swamphens were frequently

held in captivity in Europe and birds recorded in the wild may thus be escapees (Heinroth 1910, Spitzenberger 1973, Knox et al. 2000).

Standard reference works on the avifauna of the Czech Republic (Hudec & Černý 1977, Hudec et al. 1995, Hudec & Šťastný 2005) listed four records of the Purple Swamphen from 1884–1967, attributing them to two different subspecies. No Purple Swamphens have been recorded in the Czech Republic since that (FK 2011). I revised the taxonomic identity of these birds consider-

ing recent developments in the complex taxonomy of Western Palearctic Purple Swamphens and I evaluated their status as vagrants or escapees.

For the purpose of this paper I recognize (following Dickinson 2003) three subspecies of the Purple Swamphen from the Western Palearctic (which are sometimes treated as species or as subspecies groups): (1) purple-blue-backed and purple-blue-winged *P. p. porphyrio* (Linnaeus, 1758) inhabiting the western Mediterranean; (2) green-backed and purple-blue-winged *P. p. madagascariensis* (Latham, 1801) inhabiting Egypt; and (3) green-backed and green-winged *P. p. poliocephalus* (Latham, 1801) inhabiting the Caspian Sea and the Middle East (see below for a discussion).

Museum acronyms are as follows: BNH: Buquoy Collection, Nové Hrady; LLMU: Lovecko-lesnické muzeum [Hunting and Forestry Museum], Úsov; MZMB: Moravské zemské muzeum [Moravian Museum], Brno; and NMP: Národní muzeum [National Museum], Praha.

RECORDS

Below I list all the four records of Purple Swamphens from the Czech Republic (Hudec & Černý 1977, Hudec et al. 1992, Hudec & Šťastný 2005, FK 2011) in chronological order.

1884: Nové Hrady

This bird (formerly BNH; destroyed after 1945) was shot during a duck hunt at Nové Hrady, České Budějovice District, in autumn 1884 (Anonymous 1884, Buquoy 1884, Hudec & Černý 1977, Hudec & Šťastný 2005). It was an unsexed adult of the nominotypical "*porphyrio*" type (Štěpánek 1936). It was treated as an escapee already by Anonymous (1891: 242) and Bayer (1894: 158), although Kněžourek (1912: 240) argued that the

bird should be treated as a vagrant until the opposite is proven. Note that the 19th-century authors wrote that the bird had been collected during a duck hunt, but Hudec & Černý (1977: 401) and Hudec & Šťastný (2005: 372) erroneously said that it had been collected during a partridge hunt.

1905: Žehuňský pond

This bird (currently NMP P6V-000093) was shot by J. Říha, an advocate from Chlumec nad Cidlinou, on the Žehuňský pond, Kolín District, Central Bohemia on 16 July 1905 (Tschusi 1906, Štěpánek 1936). It is an unsexed adult of the "*madagascariensis*" type (Štěpánek 1936, Mlíkovský pers. observation).

1910: Nesyt pond

This bird (currently LLMU 1186), was shot on the Nesyt pond near Lednice, Břeclav District, Southern Moravia on 12 September 1910 (Urbánek 1965, Hudec & Černý 1977, Flasar et al. 2000, Hanák 2003, Hudec & Šťastný 2005). It is a juvenile of the "*madagascariensis*" type (said to be a male, but reasons for this unknown) (Urbánek 1965). Kux et al. (1955: 178) incorrectly listed this specimen as having been shot in 1911 near Lednice and incorrectly said that it belonged to the nominotypical "*porphyrio*" type. This has misled Spitzenberger (1973), who listed the "1911" bird as a fifth record of *Porphyrio* from the Czech Republic.

1957/1967: Jaroslavice

This specimen was said to have been shot at Jaroslavice either on 21 August 1967 (Hudec & Černý 1977, Hudec & Šťastný 2005) or on 21 August 1957 (Hudec et al. 1995, Hanák 2003, FK 2011); note the difference in the decade. The bird is an unsexed adult of the "*porphyrio*" type. It is deposited in the MZMB in Brno

(MZMB 30230 for the mount, and MZMB 28082 for partial skeleton, including sternum, both coracoids, cranial ends of both scapulae, and clavícula). The entries in Museum catalogues and inscriptions on labels are confusing. The Inventory Catalogue tells that the bird originates from Znojmo from 1967. A label attached to the partial skeleton gives Jaroslavice as the place of the bird's origin and a date "21 August 1967", without explaining what the date means. The Accession Catalogue tells that the bird was purchased from J. Sýkora at "Jaroslavice u Znojma" on 21 August 1957.

Most probably, this was a captive bird purchased by the MZMB on 21 August 1957 from the bird-keeper J. Sýkora, who then lived in the village of Jaroslavice near Znojmo (H. Sutorová, pers. communication, 2009 and 2010).

DISCUSSION

Taxonomic identity

The 1884 and 1957 specimens belong to the nominotypical "*porphyrio*" type, while the 1905 and 1910 specimens belong to the "*madagascariensis*" type. Some authors preferred to distinguish the Egyptian population of "*madagascariensis*" under the name *aegyptiacus* Heuglin (1856: 65), but the differences are no more considered diagnostic and *aegyptiacus* is thus currently treated as inseparable from *madagascariensis* (e.g. Keith 1986, Sangster 1998, Taylor 1998). On the other hand, the differences between individual subspecies (or subspecies groups) traditionally included in the broadly understood *P. porphyrio* are now treated as separate species by some authors (e.g. Trewick 1997, Sangster 1998). I follow here Dickinson (2003) in treating *P. porphyrio* as a polytypic species until more data are available.

Patterns of occurrence in Central Europe

I limited the following analysis to the period 1851–1950, which covers all Czech *Porphyrio* records (excluding the invalid record from 1957 – see above).

Most Purple Swamphens were recorded in the western and central parts of Central Europe (Fig. 1), which might reflect bird-keeping activities and/or intensity of bird-recording in the wild. The nearest breeding grounds of the nominotypical *porphyrio* were in the Iberian Peninsula (Sánchez Lafuente *et al.* 1992, Mañez 1997), those of the *madagascariensis* type in the Nile Delta in Egypt (Goodman & Meininger 1989).

All birds were recorded from June to December, but mostly toward the end of the year (Fig. 2). Three records without exact data available were all said to come from autumn (Spitzenberger 1973), which agrees with the above pattern.

The frequency of occurrence of Purple Swamphens and their forms seems to vary over decades (Fig. 3). Although the overall number of records is small, the statistics revealed two peaks of occurrence: one centered at 1871–1880 and the other at 1901–1910. It is notable that only the nominotypical *porphyrio* were recorded during the first peak, while only *madagascariensis* were recorded during the second peak.

Of the thirteen Central European records from 1851–1950, the Hungarian record of 1913 (Fig. 1, no. 11) and the three German records of 1909 (Fig. 1, no. 7–9) were documented as escapees (Hagen 1910, Keve-Kleiner 1943, Spitzenberger 1973).

Vagrants vs. escapees

Wild Purple Swamphens are mostly sedentary, but may leave their breeding grounds if the swamps dry out or freeze (Taylor 1998). On the other hand, like

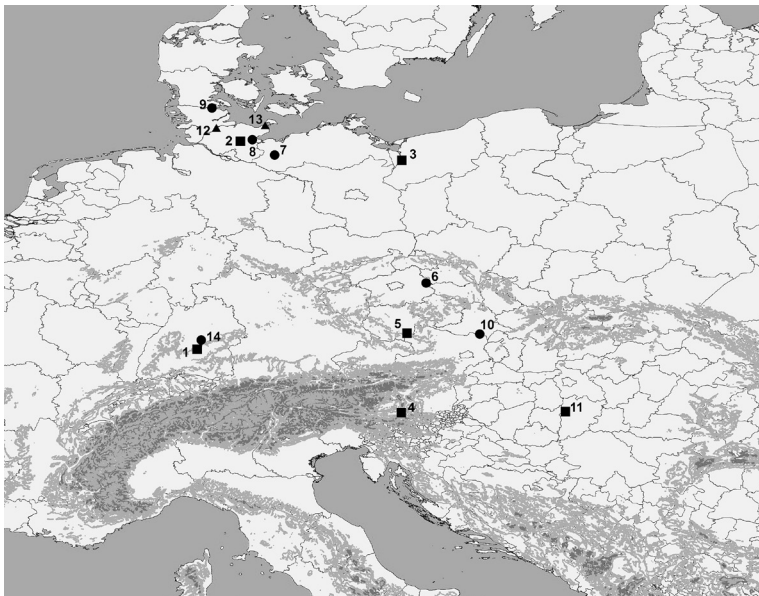


Fig. 1. Records of the Purple Swamphen in Central Europe in 1851–1950, with a historical record from Melchingen. ■ *P. p. porphyrio* ● *P. p. madagascariensis*, ▲ unknown form. 1 – Melchingen (1788), 2 – Bad Segeberg (1862), 3 – Jezioro Dąbie (1875), 4 – Völkermarkt (1879), 5 – Nové Hradky (1884), 6 – Žehuňský pond (1905), 7 – Dümmerhütte (1909), 8 – Böbs (1909), 9 – Glücksburg (1909), 10 – Nesyt pond (1910), 11 – Harta (1913), 12 – Rendsburg (1923), 13 – Heiligenhafen (1923), 14 – Neckartailfingen (1936). Czech records are from this paper, other data from Spitzenberger (1973). See text for explanation.

Obr. 1. Nálezky slípký modré ve střední Evropě v letech 1851–1950, doplněné o historický nález z Melchingenu. ■ *P. p. porphyrio* ● *P. p. madagascariensis*, ▲ neznámá forma. 1 – Melchingen (1788), 2 – Bad Segeberg (1862), 3 – Jezioro Dąbie (1875), 4 – Völkermarkt (1879), 5 – Nové Hradky (1884), 6 – Žehuňský pond (1905), 7 – Dümmerhütte (1909), 8 – Böbs (1909), 9 – Glücksburg (1909), 10 – Nesyt pond (1910), 11 – Harta (1913), 12 – Rendsburg (1923), 13 – Heiligenhafen (1923), 14 – Neckartailfingen (1936). České nálezky jsou z této práce, ostatní ze Spitzenberger (1973). Viz text pro vysvětlení.

many members of the family Rallidae, individual Purple Swampshens are able to cross large distances and their occurrence as vagrants far from their breeding grounds cannot be excluded.

Due to their limited distribution in the western Mediterranean (nominotypical *porphyrio*) and Egypt (*madagascariensis*) in the western Palearctic, it is possible to expect that *porphyrio* would reach Central Europe from the southwest *via* France, while *madagascariensis* from the southeast *via* the Balkans and that

the respective records would be concentrated along these potential migration routes. However, the geographic distribution of these records does not support this scenario (Fig. 1).

Purple Swampshens are easily held and bred in captivity and were favorite pets in Europe at least since the mid 19th century. Brehm (1867: 558) noted (my translation): “They are frequently and in large numbers offered for sale on the European animal market, so that everybody interested can get them. I can

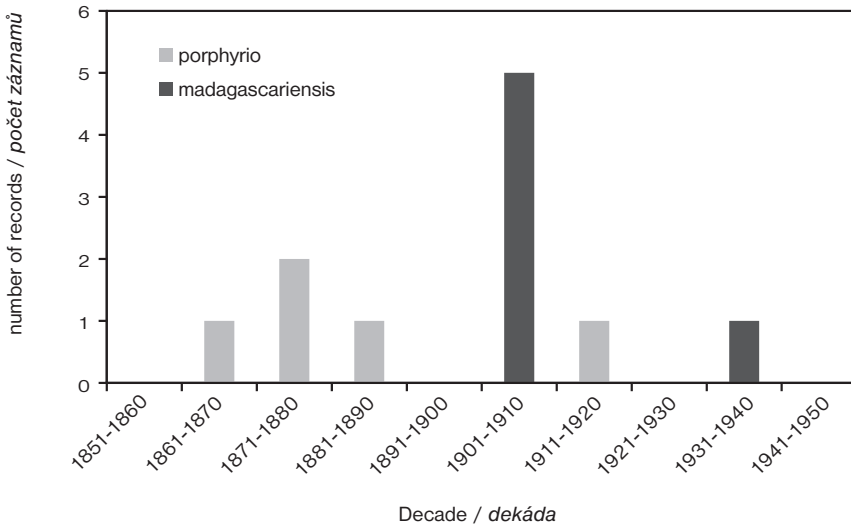


Fig. 2. Seasonal distribution of Purple Swamphen records in Central Europe in 1851–1950. Czech records are from this paper, other data from Spitzenberger (1973). See text for explanation.

Obr. 2. Rozložení nálezů slípky modré ve střední Evropě z let 1851–1950 v průběhu roku. České nálezy jsou z této práce, ostatní ze Spitzenberger (1973). Viz text pro vysvětlení.

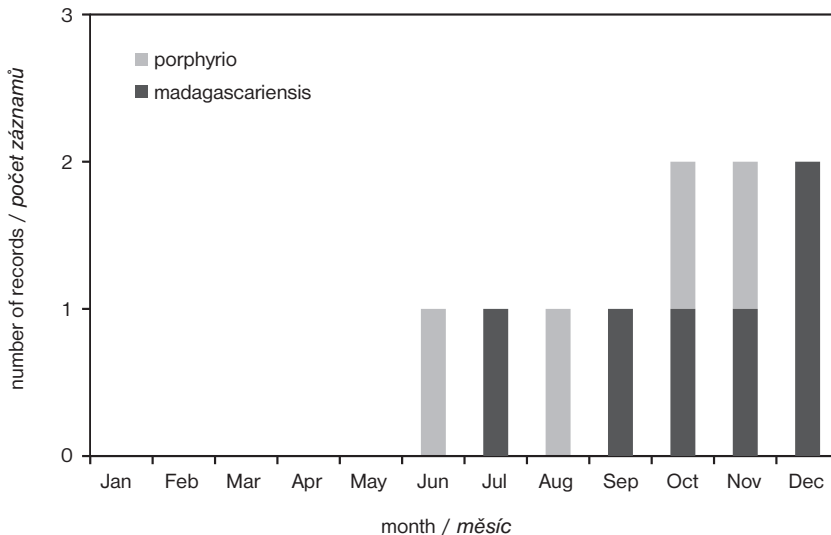


Fig. 3. Frequency of records (specimens collected or observed) of Purple Swamphen in Central Europe during 1851–1950. Czech records are from this paper, other data from Spitzenberger (1973). See text for explanation.

Obr. 3. Četnost výskytu (dle ulovených nebo pozorovaných jedinců) slípky modré ve střední Evropě v letech 1851–1950. České nálezy jsou z této práce, ostatní ze Spitzenberger (1973). Viz text pro vysvětlení.

warmly recommend them, because their price is very low, keeping them over summer is effortless and their behavior is much enjoyable. They survive for many years if they are offered a sheltered room or at least a hide in winter, and they breed if they are held in a fenced courtyard or garden.” Heinroth (1910) remarked that large numbers of Purple Swamphens were imported to Germany in the 1900s, that the birds are commonly held in a semi-wild state with clipped primaries and that they often escape after they regain flight ability due to molting. Purple Swamphens molt their primaries simultaneously; mainly in June – August in Europe (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Taylor 1998). The occurrence of escapees in Central Europe is thus well possible and one may expect that they would be recorded in the wild mainly from late summer to the beginning of winter. Indeed, all relevant records of Purple Swamphens fall in this period (Fig. 2).

These data indicate that it is much more probable that a Purple Swamphen recorded in Central Europe is an escapee than a vagrant, although both escapees and vagrants may occur. Spitzenberger (1973) suggested treating all *P. p. porphyrio* as vagrants (if their origin from captivity was not proven) and all individuals of the other subspecies as escapees, but this oversimplifies the situation. I think that some escaped birds can be unequivocally identified as escapees (e.g. if their bill is damaged in a specific manner – Keve-Kleiner 1943; or if they are individually marked), but that many escapees are inseparable from vagrants, because – due to their semi-wild life in “captivity” – their feathers and other body parts do not show any damage typical for caged birds; the more if the birds escape shortly after having molted their flight feathers.

CONCLUSIONS

Considering that a species should be admitted on a national avifaunal list only if the captive or other human-assisted origin of recorded individual(s) is excluded beyond reasonable doubts, I suggest treating the Purple Swamphen as an Escapee (category E) in the Czech avifaunal list. The 1957 specimen seems to have been purchased by the MZMB directly from its keeper and cannot be listed even as an escapee. The remaining three records should be treated as escapees. Considering the developments in the taxonomy of the Purple Swamphen (see above), I suggest treating the Czech records of the Purple Swamphen as follows (see above for details):

Porphyrio porphyrio porphyrio (Linnaeus): An escapee recorded at Nové Hradý in autumn 1884;

Porphyrio porphyrio madagascariensis (Latham): Two escapees recorded on the Žehuňský pond on 16 July 1905 and on the Nesyt pond on 12 September 1910, respectively.

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