

COMMON GALLINULE.

Gallinula chloropus, *Lath.*

La Poule d'Eau ordinaire.

THIS common species appears not only to be dispersed over the whole of Europe, but extends its range over the greater portion of Africa and India; and, in fact, like the Peregrine Falcon and Barn Owl, it may be said to be universally distributed over the globe: it is even questioned among some of our most able naturalists whether those from tropical America, China, and the islands of the Pacific, which exhibit the most trifling marks of difference, should not be considered as identically one and the same species. In the British Islands it dwells in rivers, ponds, sedgy districts, and all low marshy situations. During the severities of winter, when all our inland waters are frozen over, it retires to the larger streams and rivulets, which afford it during the rigorous weather not only a better protection against the sportsman, but also a supply of food, which could not be procured on the banks of its favourite pond or accustomed residence. Although its long and thin toes would appear to be but little adapted for such a purpose, it nevertheless possesses the greatest facility for diving, which power it not unfrequently makes use of for the purpose of obtaining water-snails, insects, and their larvæ, which, with tender weeds and grasses found at the bottom of the stream, constitute part of its food. In less rigorous weather it may frequently be seen on land, particularly in meadows and grass-fields, feeding upon worms and insects, and when thus observed its actions are both elegant and graceful; if unmolested it soon becomes less shy and retiring, and adds considerably to the life of the landscape. Its flight is heavy and awkward, and seems to be performed with great exertion. One circumstance respecting this familiar bird appears to have escaped the notice of most ornithologists, we allude to the fact of the female being clothed in a dark and rich plumage, and having the base of the bill and frontal shield of a bright crimson red tipped with fine yellow; her superiority in these respects has caused her to be mistaken for the male, which, contrary to the general rule, is at all times clothed in a duller plumage, and has the upper surface more olive than in the female; the bill is also less richly tinted. We were first led to notice this fact in consequence of observing the birds sitting or rising from the nest to be those whose richly coloured bills had induced us to believe them to be males, and which the dissection of a great number of individuals has now fully proved to us to be the females. Besides this difference in colouring, the sexes vary in size, the female being about one fifth less than her mate.

The nest of the Common Gallinule is neatly constructed of flags and weeds, and is placed among the rushes in the most retired parts of the brook or pond. The eggs are from five to nine in number, of a pale yellowish brown spotted all over with red. The young, which are hatched after an interval of three weeks from the time the female commences sitting, are clothed with a black down, and so strictly aquatic are they in their habits that they take to the water the moment after they are excluded from the shell, and are in immediate possession of all the faculties requisite for obtaining their subsistence, feeding on water-insects, flies, &c. At this tender age they encounter many enemies, and require the most assiduous care of their parents to protect them from the attack of rats, weasels, and the voracious pike, which commits the most destructive havoc not only among the young of this species but also those of many other kinds of water-fowl. The young during the first autumn, although equal to the adults in size, have a much lighter plumage, the whole of the throat and under surface being then greyish white and the bill and legs olive.

The male has the bill red at the base strongly tinged with olive; the whole of the upper parts olive brown; breast and under parts dark bluish grey tinged with olive; the centre of each feather on the flanks is blotched with a large oblong patch of white, which is the colour of the under tail-coverts; irides red; tarsi and toes greenish olive, the former being encircled with a red mark immediately above the tarsal joint, which is commonly called the *garter*.

The distinguishing characters of the female and young being given above, it is unnecessary to repeat them here.

The Plate represents an adult female and a young bird of the first year, of the natural size.