

## PORPHYRIO MELANOTUS, *Temm.*

### Black-backed Porphyrio.

*Porphyrio melanotus*, Temm. Man. d'Orn., 2nd Edit., tom. ii. p. 701.—Less. Traité d'Orn., p. 533.—Shaw, Gen. Zool., vol. xii. p. 259.

*Black-backed Gallinule*, Lath. Gen. Hist., vol. ix. p. 427.

*Ar-ra-weid-bit*, Aborigines of Port Essington.

THIS bird is universally distributed over Van Diemen's Land and the greater part of the continent of Australia wherever situations suitable to its habits occur, such as marshes, lagoons clothed with sedge and rushes, and the sides of rivers. On comparing specimens from Van Diemen's Land, South Australia and Port Essington, I find them to differ in size; those from the first- and last-mentioned localities being smaller than examples procured in South Australia and New South Wales: Mr. Gilbert's notes also indicate a difference in the habits of the Port Essington bird, but I am inclined to believe this to be merely the result of a difference in the nature of the locality and the kind of vegetation.

In Van Diemen's Land the *Porphyrio melanotus* is very abundant on the banks of the Derwent above Bridgewater, and on the Tamar for ten miles below Launceston; I also found it on the lagoons between Kangaroo Point and Clarence Plains, and in every part of the island wherever favourable localities occur. Early in the morning, and on the approach of evening, it sallies forth over the land in search of food, which consists of snails, insects, grain and various vegetable substances; it runs with great facility, and readily avails itself of this power on the approach of an intruder, making for the thickest covert and threading it with amazing quickness, much after the manner of the Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) of Europe; its flight is also very similar to that of the Moorhen, and like that bird it resorts to this mode of progression only when hard-pressed. In New South Wales it inhabits precisely the same kind of situations as those described above, and is to be found in the lagoons at Illawarra and wherever the vegetation affords it a sufficient shelter. It soon becomes domesticated, and may be allowed to roam at large in the garden or inclosure without fear of its wandering away; I saw two belonging to the Hon. Henry Elliott, Aide-de-Camp to His Excellency Captain Sir John Franklin, R.N., the Governor, in the Government Garden at Hobart Town; and my friend George Bennett, Esq., of Sydney, informs me that one he had seen domesticated in a poultry-yard was in the habit of roosting upon the roofs of sheds, and was very fond of perching on some parrot-cages; he mentions also that the bird invariably seizes maize, or any vegetable it intends eating, in the palm of the foot, holding it in that manner until it be devoured; after watching it for some time he never saw it take food in any other manner, and the owner assured him that it never did.

Mr. Gilbert found this bird tolerably abundant at Port Essington, on a salt-water lake near Point Smith, in which some thick clumps of mangroves were growing; so far as his observation extended, this was the only part of the Peninsula in which it was to be found, and indeed, until he shot a specimen, it was unknown to the residents, who believed they had explored every part of the Peninsula adjacent to the shores of the harbour. He remarked that it appeared to confine itself to the mangroves, and to perch on their topmost branches, and that when disturbed it mounted above the tops of the trees and flew off for several hundred yards.

The sexes do not differ in colouring, but the female is somewhat smaller than her mate, and the young have the naked space on the crown less developed and not so bright as in the adult.

Cheeks, back of the head, centre of the abdomen and thighs sooty black; back of the neck, breast and flanks rich deep indigo-blue; back, wings and tail deep shining black, the primaries with a wash of indigo-blue on their outer webs; under tail-coverts pure white; irides bright orange-red; frontal plate, bill, legs and feet red.

The Plate represents the two sexes of the natural size.