

The glorious gallinule

Rare birds spotted during 2023 vie for award

[Tom Leskiw](#) May 8, 2024 at 3:34 a.m.



The purple gallinule was first discovered at the Brackish and East ponds at the Arcata Marsh in November 2023. Many locals and out-of-towners came to enjoy the bird during its 37-day stay. (Photo by Laura Cutler)

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2023 was an amazing year for rare avian visitors, as three of the five nominees for Humboldt County Bird of the Year turned out to be the first confirmed sightings for these species here and the other two were second sightings.

The bird crowned for 2023 — a purple gallinule — was first spotted at the Arcata Marsh on Nov. 24.

The Humboldt County Bird of the Year award is intended to honor the rare species that find favorable habitat here for periods usually ranging from a single day to several months and the dedicated birders that “pound the patches” to dig them out for others to enjoy.

Sometimes, the birds attract people from out of the county or even from out of state to spend their ecotourism dollars here. This year’s sponsors and judges were Jude Power, Keith Slauson and me, Tom Leskiw. Rob Fowler contributed data. Species were selected based on their rarity in the county, whether they remained long enough to be seen by many people, with a plus if

their sighting generated some visitor spending. The award was presented on April 20 during Godwit Days.

In fifth place is Cory's shearwater, a first confirmed Humboldt County record and only a fourth state record for this seabird. It was spotted by Tony Kurz and Emmett Iverson during an Oct. 8 pelagic trip on the Stellar Sunrise.



The Cory's shearwater was spotted during an Oct. 8, 2023 pelagic trip on the Stellar Sunrise. (Photo by Max Benningfield)

Kurz said, "It was an OK day seeing a good diversity of pelagic birds, but not huge numbers. We were headed back and the vibe on the boat was relaxed, with some folks tired from being on the water for hours. Emmett and I were chilling at the stern when I spotted a large shearwater approaching. I rubbed it off as a pink-footed shearwater, one of the most abundant shearwaters seen that day. Emmett got eyes on it when I believe I said, 'Real nice look at a pink-foot.' As it came closer, I noted the clean white color on its underside and it seemed to be a heavier shearwater that glided more than the others seen that day. It occasionally would display heavy wing beats, reminiscent of an albatross. The major physical characteristic that I focused on was its large yellow bill. 'It has a yellow bill!' I called out, and Emmett shouted, 'Cory's shearwater!' Everyone got onto the bird as it flew toward the bow, briefly circling back before disappearing into the fog."

In fourth place is field sparrow, discovered the day after Christmas by Lucas Stephenson, who was birding with his dad, Mark, along the Mad River Road at the Collenberg Dairy. It stayed in the vicinity until mid-February, allowing many people to see this second county record.



The field sparrow was discovered Dec. 26, 2023, along the Mad River Road at the Collenberg Dairy. (Photo by Mark Stephenson)

Stephenson wrote, “As we were driving, my dad and I saw a tropical kingbird on the wires along the road. While we stopped, there was very good bird activity, including palm and orange-crowned warblers chipping nearby. A small sparrow-type bird flew into the birch above the house opposite the dairy. I put my bins on it and noticed the blank face expression and knew it was either a field sparrow or an odd *Zonotrichia* (the genus that includes golden- and white-crowned sparrows) hybrid, but more likely a field. My dad snapped a few photos that confirmed the bird’s ID. It then flew down into some bushes and gave a high-pitched tsip flight call and skulked for a while before coming out into plain view on a fence. Its identity was clear: red mantle feathers, bright pink bill, white eye-ring, clear breast, long tail. The moment was amazing and unforgettable; I was shaking in awe.”

Garganey came in third place. This Old World teal was found on Allen Marsh at the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary on Oct. 14 by Sasha Cahill and Kellen Apuna. This second Humboldt County record remained at the marsh until Oct. 24, allowing many birders to spot it.



The garganey was initially spotted on Allen Marsh at the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary on Oct. 14. (Photo by Kellen Apuna)

Cahill said of their find: “Kellen and I rendezvoused around 3:30 p.m. to bird the Arcata Marsh. At the northwest corner of Allen Marsh, we stopped to observe wood ducks, as Kellen had not yet photographed the species. As we picked through several green-winged teal, Kellen noticed a duck that looked like a potential garganey, though he wasn’t certain. Photos were sent to Rob Fowler and Emmett Iverson, and during the half-hour wait for a response, we mulled over the ID. We posted photos to the Northwest California WhatsApp group and many quickly agreed that this was, indeed, a garganey. “

The runner-up bird species was a yellow-bellied flycatcher, found Dec. 14 by Gary Bloomfield on West End Road in Arcata. For the uninitiated, “Empids” (short for the genus *Empidonax*) are “little green jobs,” their correct identification being the bane of birders. As Bloomfield recorded in his journal: “I was looking in vain for the black-and-white warbler that Rob Fowler found along West End Road when I came across a puzzling Empid that was rather cooperative, allowing me to get nice photos and a decent sound recording. I finally, late that evening, was able to study the photos and sound file and determine that this had to be Humboldt’s first yellow-bellied flycatcher.”



This is a yellow-bellied flycatcher sketch by Gary Bloomfield, who first found the bird on Dec. 14, 2023, on West End Road in Arcata. (Submitted)

Many birders made the pilgrimage to view this bird; it was last reported to eBird on March 30.

So, on to the Humboldt County Bird of 2023: purple gallinule. It was found one day after Thanksgiving — Nov. 24 — by Yana Valachovic, Nicole King and her father, Tom King, between Brackish and East ponds at the Arcata Marsh during a post-holiday walk. Many locals and out-of-towners came to enjoy the bird during its 37-day stay; it was last reported to eBird by Mark Colwell on Dec. 30. Two hundred eight eBird checklists were submitted for this first Humboldt County record! The bird was enjoyed by many more than that, owing to its presence along a popular trail, replete with birders acting as “instant docents” for the many folks who walked the trail during the post-Thanksgiving to nearly New Year’s mega-holiday.

Valachovic describes the circumstances of her party’s find: “It started as a typical post-Thanksgiving day. Full of overindulging from the night before, I met some of my closest friends and their extended family for a walk at the Arcata Marsh. It was time to be relieved of cooking, the pressures of hosting, and to embrace old friendships and stretch one’s legs. As a gaggle of 10 plus a few dogs in freezing temperatures, we started the usual marsh laps. No one had binoculars, but our party — hailing from Reno, Berkeley and Arcata — had a keen eye for adventure. Although Nicole and I were deep in conversation, we abruptly stopped between East and Brackish ponds as we saw ... a bird, bedazzling with the blue-green vibrancy of a parrot, a candy corn beak and bright yellow legs and feet perched on willow branches.

“You don’t have to be a trained ornithologist to recognize an interloper. ‘This is not a bird from around here. Is it injured, lost or finding refuge from the cold in these willows?’ were the thoughts that ran through our minds. Nicole’s brother, Morgan, a great bird enthusiast, immediately sent a photo to Greg Gray, a birder friend. No response. I sent a pic to another birder friend, Leisyka Parrott. She immediately responded with intrigue. Then Tom, who was raised in Florida, said, ‘Could this be a gallinule?’ Could that be true?

“Sadly,” Valachovic added, “I will admit that it’s been over a year since I opened my iBird program. I can hear my ornithology professor, Steve Herman, from Evergreen State College in Washington, say, ‘You don’t need an app; you just need to know them all.’ That is true. He schooled me in Grinnell-style journaling in 1991, but clearly, I did not keep up the discipline.

“I went through the frustrating process of remembering my Apple ID so I could pay a new fee to open the program to look for ‘gallinule.’ Double-clicking to pay the money to open the app, all the while stressing that the bird would leave before we could definitely ID it. The app finally opened, and voila, a peek at gallinule. There you have it: a purple gallinule!

“I sent the potential identification to Leisyka,” Valachovic said. “We decided it was a match. She posted the sighting on WhatsApp Rare Birds of NWCALI for (almost) Everyone. That was the bat signal; within 15 minutes, people were running towards the sighting, with scopes and cameras in tow. We chuckled at what mishap our post-Thanksgiving adventure had created.

“What ensued has touched my heart. The ‘rainbow chicken,’ as I started to refer to it, became a local phenomenon driven by birder networks and a posting on Lost Coast Outpost,” Valachovic said. “The bird was not injured and it seemed to thrive here for weeks, despite cold temperatures, eating frogs. For a semi-tropical creature, what brought it here, what kept it here is hard to know. I’ve heard of people traveling significant distances to see the bird. For the next five weeks, the gallinule stayed around those two ponds. I made many trips to see it, and each time, I appreciated young and old alike, watching patiently to get a few minutes with our visitor.

“What joy this adventurous bird has brought! A friend commented, ‘What’s all the fuss? It’s just a lost bird.’ Well, I contend, not all who wander are lost! Thank you, rainbow chicken, for reminding us that travel brings new friends and adventures. And for becoming one of our most appreciated 2023 North Coast visitors!”