

# Feather Fascination!

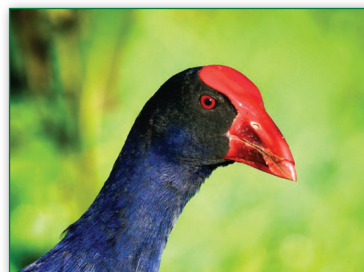
with local Birdwatcher,  
Jim Butler

## Purple Swampphen

IN 350 B.C.E. Aristotle wrote the "History of Animals". This is the first known systematic survey of 300 common animals. The Purple Swampphen is included in Aristotle's book and its description is so detailed he must have observed captive birds. Literary sources, from ancient Greece to the present day, provide convincing evidence that Purple Swampphens

were often kept in captivity but not as food, rather as companions. Therefore, this esteemed bird received many artistic depictions in historical civilizations and during the Roman period mosaics of the bird are common. This continued into the early Christian mosaics 4th – 6th Century. One mosaic shows the Purple Swampphen entering Noah's Ark! You would recognise the Purple Swampphen in the 5th Century mosaics from Antioch, Turkey.

Today the Purple Swampphen (46cm) is a large and conspicuous waterhen living with us. It is found near lakes, swamps and urban wetlands and dams. It forages amongst the reeds and grasses near the water. However, it does walk confidently on floating vegetation and flies strongly over open water and from danger with its long legs and large feet dangling awkwardly. It feeds on soft shoots and on frogs and snails. It eats by clasping the food in its foot. And as it walks it flicks its tail to flash its white underside as a signal.



The striking feature of the Purple Swampphen is its bright red frontal shield. Studies have shown that birds with the larger and brighter shield are more socially dominant; and males with larger shields have larger testes.

Enjoy this bird that the ancient Greeks and Romans treasured.

~ Jim

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Digital Bird Guide:  
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Images: Top - Purple Swampphen  
with tail flicked up by Carson Dron  
Bottom - Detailed Frontal Shield  
by E. Frazer