

# American coot

*Fulica americana*

By Jim Pashby

I've always had a soft spot for coots, also known as mud hens. During the many hours my dog and I have spent in duck blinds with no ducks in sight, coots are often our companions and a source of entertainment. Occasionally they swim up to investigate my mallard decoys, circle a few times as if puzzled, then putter off, chirping and squeaking as they go.

## IDENTIFICATION

Coots are often mistaken for small ducks; in profile they resemble American wigeons. But coots are actually more closely related to rails, a group of rarely seen birds found deep in marsh vegetation.

A coot is the size of a chicken, with a dark-gray to black body and wings. The short, thick bill is white, as is the frontal shield, which has a tiny red patch at the top. The birds make soft squeaks, cheerful chirps, and light trumpeting sounds.

## BEHAVIOR

You rarely see coots on land or in flight. They spend nearly all their time in ponds and lakes, eating aquatic plants and insects. These gregarious birds swim in large groups known as "rafts," regularly diving for underwater vegetation using their large feet for propulsion. They don't fly if they can help it. To get airborne, coots require long, running takeoffs and a furious flapping of the wings. Their flight is labored and clumsy. It's hard to believe they can migrate hundreds of miles twice each year, but somehow they manage.

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## SCIENTIFIC NAME

*Fulica* is Latin for "coot," and *americana* means "America."

## RANGE AND HABITAT

The coot's breeding range extends from southern Quebec to the Pacific coast and as far south as Central America.

In Montana, the birds are found statewide in lakes, ponds, and deep wetlands ringed with cattails and bulrushes. In fall they migrate south to Texas, Louisiana, and other southern states.

## REPRODUCTION

Coots mate during May and June. Once they bond, a mating pair selects a nesting territory, which the male aggressively defends from other males by striking out at intruders with his large feet.

Each season, coots build several nests, which are hidden among tall reeds, cattails, and bulrushes. The hen lays her eggs in one nest and uses the others as places for the young to rest when not swimming.

The hen lays an average of six eggs, which take 21 days to hatch.

When baby coots hatch, orange-tipped plumes known as "chick ornaments" cover the front half of their body. These colored feathers fade after about a week. Scientists suspect the coloration evolved as a way for chicks to stand out from each other as they compete for food from the parents.

## DIET

Coots are omnivores. They eat the stems, leaves, and seeds of pondweeds, sedges,

grasses, and other vegetation, as well as algae. They also consume aquatic insects, tadpoles, fish, worms, snails, and crayfish, along with grasshoppers, ants, and beetles blown onto the water surface.

## PREDATION

Coots fall prey to bald eagles, raccoons, and red foxes. Crows and magpies sometimes sneak in and snatch coot eggs, though coot parents defend the nest aggressively.

## CONSERVATION

Coots are considered a migratory game bird protected by seasons and limits, but few are shot by hunters. The birds rarely fly to provide wing shooting, and the meat is described as "muddy" tasting, though it's used sometimes in gumbo, which can mask the taste of almost anything.

Coots are common and widespread, and populations appear stable, according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. Despite the species' healthy status, a group calling itself Coots Unlimited was established in 1979 in the town of Ashby in western Minnesota. It turns out the 250-member club focuses not on coot conservation but general wildlife habitat restoration and youth hunting education projects, which it funds with an annual banquet.

And the name? "We wanted something original that no one else would have," says founding member Jim Rylander. 🦆

