

# Caribbean Coot



Gabriel Lago/gabriellago.com







Maurice-Yves Roy-Camille/birds-and-co.com

The Caribbean Coot *Fulica caribaea* is a member of the family Rallidae, which contains the rails, crakes, gallinules and coots. Adults are around 33–38 cm long, with sooty black plumage all over except for some white under the tail. The males are larger than the females and usually have larger white shields.

Is the Caribbean Coot a true species? At present, it appears to be recognised as such but there is still some debate as to whether it is not just a variant of the widely spread and common American Coot. Certainly the two coots are very similar in appearance and they are known to inter-breed and produce viable offspring. Indeed, it would be much better for the Caribbean bird if it was the same species as the American one, as the former is declining in numbers, threatened by habitat destruction, pollution and hunting, while the latter is suffering no such fate.

### Black bird with white shield

The Caribbean Coot *Fulica caribaea* is in the family Rallidae, which is the largest and most diverse of the twelve families in the order Gruiformes. The Rallidae contains rails, crakes and gallinules as well as the coots. Unfortunately for this group of birds, many are either poor flyers or are flightless and, in consequence, a fair number of these have been driven to extinction, or close to it, by humans and introduced species such as cats, dogs, rats and snakes, which find them to be easy prey. All the coots are in the genus *Fulica*. There are now 11 living species in the taxa; one became extinct around 1700 (the Mascarene Coot), a couple died out in pre-historic times and two others are known only from fossil records. South America holds the greatest number of coot species and it is likely that the genus originated there. Now the most widespread species is the Common or Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* which occurs and breeds in numerous countries in Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa and has recently expanded its range into New

Zealand. All coots are medium sized water birds with predominantly black plumage. The adult Caribbean Coot is around 33–38 cm long, with sooty black plumage all over except for some white under the tail. Its underside is slightly lighter in colour, while its head and neck are darker. It has a short, thick white bill, with a reddish brown band near the tip, and a relatively large white forehead shield, extending to the bird's crown. The shield is sometimes tinged yellow. It is this featherless shield which gave rise to the expression "as bald as a coot", which the Oxford English Dictionary cites as being in use as early as 1430. Coots have short, rounded wings and tend to be weak fliers, but they have strong legs, so they can walk and run well. Their toes are long, so they are well adapted to walking on soft, uneven surfaces, and are scalloped, rather than webbed. The Caribbean Coot has yellow legs and toes and red eyes.



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The males are larger than the females and usually have larger white shields.

The presence of the large white shield is used to distinguish the Caribbean Coot from the, sometimes sympatric, American Coot *Fulica americana* in which the

across the water with much resultant splashing. Coots fly with their neck extended and their heavy feet stretched out behind, so that, from a distance, the bird looks as if it has a long tail. Any long distance flying is done at night, and some species, but probably not the



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The Caribbean Coot is endemic to the Caribbean region, being mostly confined to the chain of islands from the southern Bahamas to Trinidad, but also present on the mainland of northern Venezuela. In most places it is uncommon or rare, and appears to be a breeding resident on only 13 islands. In common with other coots, the Caribbean Coot is a reluctant flier, looking clumsy and awkward when taking off as it runs or pedals across the water with much resultant splashing.

white shield extends only to the eyes or halfway between the eyes and crown, or it may be absent altogether. In addition, the American Coot has a large reddish or brownish callus at the top of the shield, which the Caribbean Coot does not possess. However, some American Coots have a much larger shield and no callus, which makes positive identification difficult in areas where the two species overlap and, indeed, means that some people think that the two "species" are merely variants of one species. Certainly, they have been reported to inter-breed in Barbados and to raise viable chicks.

All the coots appear to be reluctant fliers, looking clumsy and awkward when taking off as they run or pedal

Caribbean Coot, do cover considerable distances. For instance, the American Coot has appeared in Great Britain on occasions.

### Foraging on both land and water

The Caribbean Coot is endemic to the Caribbean islands, being mostly confined to the chain of islands from the southern Bahamas to Trinidad, but also being present on the mainland of northern Venezuela. In most places it is uncommon or rare, and is thought to be a breeding resident in only ten of the 21 countries in its range, including on Antigua and Barbuda. As well as on





Gabriel Lugo/gabrielugo.com

*The American Coot Fulica americana is gregarious during the non-breeding season, but is aggressively territorial during the breeding season, with both male and female involved in territorial defence, and the same appears to be true for the Caribbean Coot. Nests are almost certainly built by both parents. They tend to be well hidden in tall reeds or grasses near the water's edge.*

these two islands, the coot has been confirmed to breed on the islands of Jamaica, Hispaniola, Puerto Rico, St Croix, St Maarten, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Barbados, Bonaire, Curacao and Aruba. In the other countries, it is recorded as a non-breeding resident or merely as a vagrant.

Unlike the American Coot, which breeds in northern latitudes and then may migrate, with some birds wintering in the Caribbean, the Caribbean Coot is thought to be largely sedentary. In the more arid areas of the southern Caribbean, which have few permanent water sources, the coot is not present year round, but is an occasional and irregular breeder. However, on these drier islands, it is making increasing use of permanent man-made ponds on, for instance, golf courses and in wastewater treatment sites. In the less arid regions, it is dependent on freshwater lakes, ponds and marshes and, to a lesser extent, on coastal brackish lagoons.

There appear to be few, if any, records of the food of the Caribbean Coot, but it is assumed that, as for other coots, its diet is mostly plant material, but also includes small animals such as fish, insects, worms and molluscs. Coots show considerable variation in their feeding behaviour, foraging on both land and water. Being good walkers as well as efficient swimmers, they may be seen grazing some distance away from water. Unlike many of their more secretive rail relatives, coots often swim in open water, quite far from any cover. They tend to swim along with their head bobbing, this characteristic earning the American species the common name of marsh or mud hen as the head bob is reminiscent of chickens. Coots dive frequently, making short dives from a little jump, but usually stay underwater for only 15 seconds or so.

### Territorial or gregarious

Again there has been little work published on the social relationships or reproduction strategies of the Caribbean Coot. Most studies are more concerned with working out how many of the birds still exist and where they are to be found. However, as with the diet of this species, it is probably safe to assume that the social life and breeding habits of the Caribbean Coot are pretty similar to those of its close relations. Both the Eurasian Coot and the American Coot are aggressively territorial during the breeding season, with both parents involved in territorial defence. However, during the non-breeding season, they may form large flocks. This is likely true for the Caribbean Coot too – indeed this species has been seen in groups of over 800 individuals in the



Claude Nadeau/claudenadeau.ca



Netherlands Antilles. Breeding in the Caribbean Coot appears to take place year-round in some places, with peaks in different months depending on what islands the birds are found. In general, it seems they may breed seasonally in the southern parts of their range, but year round in the north. For instance, egg laying in the Netherlands Antilles peaks during the first months of the year, whereas in Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands, breeding peaks were seen in April–June and in September–November. On Barbados breeding has been recorded from April to September, whereas on Hispaniola breeding has been recorded all year round.

Nests are almost certainly built by both parents. They tend to be well hidden in tall reeds or grasses near the water's edge or, less commonly, further from shore on emergent vegetation where they form floating platforms. The nest is made from any nearby vegetation and is built mainly of sticks and twigs, but with the inner cup lined with softer material. It can be raised up to 30 cm or so above water level and often has a ramp leading up to it. In a study of coots in the US Virgin Islands, 5–9 eggs were laid in a clutch. The eggs are speckled whitish or pale brown and are incubated by both sexes for around three weeks. When first hatched, the chicks are shaggy looking and dark grey, with a distinctive orange collar and a red bare crown and bill. The young leave the nest the day they hatch, but return to it at night. During the day, they follow their parents around, being fed by them, but tend to remain well hidden in vegetation. They begin to dive and seek their own food after 30 days or thereabouts and are independent at approximately two months old.

In the US Virgin Islands, it was found that though hatching success was high, at around 65 percent, by the



naturepl.com/Rolf Nussbaumer (Fulica americana)

time the chicks fledged 3–4 weeks later, the survival rate was down to only 41 percent and by the time they were fully grown and independent at 60–70 days of age only 27 percent of them were still alive. This low reproductive success was put down to heavy predation on the chicks by rats, egrets and herons.

### Protection is urgently needed

The Caribbean Coot is listed as “Near Threatened” by IUCN – the World Conservation Union in its latest Red List of Threatened Species (last evaluated in 2008). IUCN gives it this classification “because it is declining moderately rapidly throughout its range owing to hunting and wetland drainage”. Fourteen years earlier, in 1994, it was listed as Lower Risk/Least Concern. In a recent paper, it has been suggested that the species



naturepl.com/Shantil & Rozinski (Fulica americana)

*The newly hatched chicks of the Caribbean Coot are shaggy looking and dark grey, with a distinctive orange collar and a red bare crown and bill. A shield is not developed. They leave the nest the day they hatch, but return to it at night. During the day, they follow their parents around, being constantly fed by them.*





Claude Nadeau/claudeadeau.ca

*The Caribbean Coot breeds within a restricted range of around 1000 sq km or thereabouts. In most instances, the sites where it is found are small, with only 15 covering more than 10 sq km. Many of these places are threatened by drainage, land reclamation and/or pollution. Since the bird itself is moreover threatened by hunters and introduced predators, the numbers are declining throughout the range.*

should now be listed as Vulnerable because of its restricted range, the high levels of threat it faces and the limited protection it currently receives. Of course, one of the problems with deciding on the conservation standing of this species is the uncertainty of its taxonomic status resulting from it formerly being considered conspecific with the American Coot, which winters in large numbers in the Caribbean.

The Caribbean Coot breeds within a restricted range of around only 1000 km<sup>2</sup> or thereabouts. In most instances, the sites where it is found are small, with only 15 covering more than 1000 ha. Legal protection of areas where it occurs is limited, with only 11 sites included in the regional protected area network, with an additional five receiving some protection, mostly through restrictions imposed on hunters. Many of the places where the coot is found, even the supposedly protected areas, are threatened, with the most common threats being habitat loss through drainage and land reclamation, hunting and pollution. It is also threatened by egg robbers and by introduced predators. Hybridisation with the American Coot is known to occur and this could be another cause of the decline of the Caribbean Coot. This is probably not a problem, but further research is certainly required.

Although there is considerable scope for more data to be collected on the ecology, distribution and behaviour of the Caribbean Coot, it is evident that a successful conservation strategy for the species must involve an increase in the active protection of both the bird and its habitat. There needs to be improved legal protection of the coots and effective enforcement of the rules so that

the numbers killed by hunters are reduced and egg collectors cease their activities. More sites need to be included in the protected area network, and these areas need to be actively looked after, not drained, polluted or converted to other uses. Given that the Caribbean Coot is presumed to be sedentary and it is fairly gregarious, it is likely that large tracts of land are not needed for its survival, a reasonable number of small wetland areas would suffice.

In addition, education of the local people and raising public awareness is also paramount if the species is to be saved. Several of the islands in which the Caribbean Coot is found (Antigua and Barbuda, Jamaica, Hispaniola and Puerto Rico) are already actively involved with the West Indian Duck and Wetlands Conservation Project. This project began in 1997 and seeks to reverse the decline of the globally threatened duck *Dendrocygna arborea*. Importantly for the coot, the project is also concerned with attempting to stop the continuing loss and degradation of wetlands throughout the Caribbean. Local teachers and educators are provided with training and educational tools and work is done to raise awareness of and appreciation for the value of local wetlands and their biodiversity. The Caribbean Coot should be able to benefit from this project, but protection of this bird and its habitat must become more effective, and soon, if the species is to be saved.