

## American Coots

**These “bad boys” of the bird world deserve a little respect.**

By Bob Garrison

Experienced birders rarely give this common marsh bird a second glance and often make disparaging remarks about its lineage. Hunters occasionally pursue the coot, but certainly wouldn't admit it to their friends. Golf course and city park managers downright disdain coots when large wintering flocks deposit great amounts of slippery droppings on the grassy borders of ponds and water hazards. Despite its reputation, the much maligned coot is in fact, one of the most interesting and easily watched birds of the wetlands.

As their name implies, American coots are found throughout the United States and can be found year-round in all parts of California. Coots thrive in shallow freshwater lakes, marshes, and rivers where they feed mainly on aquatic plants. In the winter, coots gather in large flocks near fresh and salt water.

Coots are fiercely territorial, taking the art of intimidation and fighting to new levels. Although fighting lessens after the breeding season, male coots will still drive other individuals from a favorite feeding area. Coots use a wide variety of postures and calls to dissuade intruders. When challenged, the coots begin with a faster and faster swim which ends with their characteristic running charge across the water. This charge often leads to combat where the opponent is grabbed with one foot and hit with the other until the loser is flipped on its back and finally driven off. Coots may even stand up to human intrusion by puffing up their feathers so they appear larger than life.

The coot's aggressive nature extends to its feeding behaviors as well. Coots will follow flocks of feeding waterfowl and snap up leftover weeds floating on the water. They also gang up on individual ducks and steal food right from their mouths. In turn, some of the larger dabbling ducks such as gadwalls and American widgeons who feed in shallow water chase the coots for the plants they can retrieve from deeper water.

Because coots are so common, birders often bypass the bird in search of rarer species. But take some time during your winter outings to sit and watch this fascinating bird. If you are new to bird watching or teaching a younger family member how to use binoculars, coots are a great bird to hone your skills on. Its large size and bold behavior will give you hours of viewing enjoyment. Try keeping a journal of the multitude of behaviors and activities you will see displayed by a flock of coots.

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