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THE AMERICAN COOT AS A GAME BIRD

The American coot, commonly called mud hen, has never been an attractive item in the game bag of hunters on the Pacific Coast. This has been offered as a good reason for its abundance. In the past, ducks have been abundant and perhaps the name, mud hen, has spread the idea that the bird is not an attractive part of a sportsman's menu.

The coot is no more of a mud hen than the common varieties of ducks as far as its food is concerned. It lives largely on grasses and grain. Water hen, marsh hen or meadow hen are common names that indicate the bird's traits and food habits.

Many gun clubs in the west consider the coot a nuisance because it takes the natural food of ducks and especially the grain that is scattered in ponds to bait the ducks within shooting distance. In some localities coots flock in winter time all through the southern states. On baited areas, the coots are friendly and come right in for food. The ducks use them as buffers, waiting awhile to see if the coast is clear of danger.

In some localities, hunters make a business of killing coots as pests. If ducks continue to disappear, the time may approach when sportsmen in the west will take on the coot as a game bird.

Along the Atlantic Coast, hunters apply the name of coot to some of the marine ducks which are the several species of scoters. These are hunted and killed as game birds but as food, they are not equal to the real coot or marsh hen. The scoters live on small muscles and shell fish. The flesh is coarser and more fishy in flavor than that of the American coot.

The coots breed up and down the Pacific Coast in marshes or tule-bordered ponds. They make platform nests, woven together like wicker baskets, in the reeds just above the water. A young coot just out of the egg is a strikingly colored chick with no resemblance to his father or mother. His body is covered with black down but projecting from his neck and head are crinkled feathers with hair-like ends of bright orange color. His bill is red.

Anyone may recognize the American coot with its slate colored body and black head in contrast with the white beak. As a coot swims, his head moves forward and backward. When forced to fly, he patters along the surface quite a distance splattering water with his feet and wings. In flight, his feet stretch straight out behind looking as if he had rather a long tail. This appearance easily distinguishes him from any of the commoner ducks.