

Even the Coots Have Some Good Points

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"WHEN a fur or feathered population jumps up so it looks as if it might be shy on food, the plan ought to be to declare war and sell more licenses to the hunters," said an old-timer coming in from the field.

"Maybe, but all the hunters are developing into bird lovers," answered his companion. "They are all organizing and joining gun clubs. While they love to get the limit of mallards and pintails, look how they protect the gentle coot that is half duck and half chicken. Did you notice in the federal and state laws that a gunner can't shoot more than 10 ducks a day, but the new regulations say he can kill 25 coots from seven in the morning to four in the afternoon, if he wishes?"

"No, he doesn't crack down on the coots because he knows nothing about cooking," said the first. "He thinks the coot tastes like a crow. But its food is the same as the duck's. Expert cooks have parboiled and roasted coots to perfection and the game flavor is excellent. Lucky is the American coot because it is called a mud-hen. The mallard ought to have been called a mug-wump."

The American coot should worry. Today he fills about as large a place in the life of a well conducted swamp as chickens do in a barnyard. Especially in the breeding season the sound of their gulping call, "pulque, pluke, pulque, pulque" is the over-tone across the lake. These notes are uttered while the birds cut through the water with their heads poked out in front flat on the surface as if challenging each other.

Everyone is familiar with the shuffling manner that a coot rises from the water, floundering and

kicking to get up steam. When forced to fly, he runs flapping along the top for some distance before gaining headway to rise. Both wings and feet make the water fly in every direction. In flight the coot carries his legs at full length behind him as if he was using them as a rudder. This is because he has an abbreviated tail. In diving he leaps upward and turns a half somersault in the air very much after the fashion of the grebe.

The ordinary hunter who likes to get out and shoot waterfowl on the wing has had very little experience with the coot. In the first place, this is a bird that does not take flight in the manner of a duck. It likes to feed along the surface and is not expert on the wing. This tendency, as well as the looks of a mud-hen compared with the mallard, and some of the common names of the bird like "crow-duck" or "Chinese mallard," has spread the impression among sportsmen that it is not a very palatable bird.

For years some of the San Francisco hotels used to buy quantities of coots and serve them to their patrons as ducks. Formerly when the gun clubs used to have "mud-hen shoots" at the beginning of the duck season, the birds were delivered to the hotels. Coots are much more abundant in the wild regions of the West, and in a time of scarcity of ducks Eastern hunters take to coots.

The coot is the clown of the rail family. His feet are not webbed straight across, but each toe has a sort of a scollop of lobes which makes as good a paddler as a duck's foot. It is a common mistake in the East to apply the name coot to those marine ducks which should be properly be called scoters. They are not really sea coots.

The coot ranges over a good part

of the North American continent. It breeds as far north as British Columbia and is more common in the West than in the East. However, there is hardly a favorable marsh West or East that does not support some of these birds during the summer season. In many swamps and marshes along the Pacific Coast the nests of the mud-hens are greater than any of the native species of ducks. Through the tule districts of Central California large numbers of these birds breed and do not migrate.

Any person with even the slightest knowledge of waterfowl can easily distinguish the mud-hen because it has a short whitish bill. Its coat is of dark slate color shading into black on the head and neck. In flight a white patch on the hind margin of each wing shows clearly, and the large feet protrude behind the end of the tail. When walking on land or swimming in the water, the fore and aft bobbing motion of the head in unison with that of the feet

easily distinguishes the bird from an ordinary duck. The common nesting site of the coot is in the edge of a tule thicket.

Years ago when there was a long open season for shooting ducks, and when the bag limits were large and many of the feeding and breeding areas were destroyed, the duck population dropped down until it looked as if some species would be exterminated. Although there was an open season on coots, their numbers did not greatly diminish. In fact, they were much more abundant than ducks in many places, the Biological Survey jumped to the conclusion that it would be better to encourage the killing of coots rather than other varieties of waterfowl. The present daily bag limit on ducks is 10, but this does not include more than three of any one species. The bag limit of coots has been increased to 25. Yet with this increase, hunters do not take to mud-hens even though they are more numerous. They stick to their ducks and geese.



At ease. Coots on a lake in Golden Gate park.