

American Coot

Fulica americana

Found in both North and South America, the American Coot is an abundant breeder throughout much of the western U.S. and Canada. In the East, the species breeds regularly across southern Canada and the northern tier of states to the St. Lawrence River valley, but becomes very local farther east and south (except for Florida, where it is a regular breeder).

American Coots appear in Vermont in mid April during spring migration. Because of their scarcity the arrival and nesting dates of local breeders are unknown. Bull (1974) gave egg dates from April 25 to July 14 for New York. Nesting is not initiated until vegetative growth is sufficient for nest concealment (Fredrickson 1970), since the nests, while often floating, are usually anchored to emergent vegetation. Coots are highly territorial during the breeding period, attacking both waterfowl and other coots that venture into their territory. A variety of calls and notable displays are evident during courtship (Gullion 1954; Ripley 1977). In prime breeding range, territories are often as small as 0.7 ha (less than 1 a) in areas of emergent aquatic vegetation (Sugden 1979).

Nests are seldom closer than 40 m (131 ft) from one another (Sugden 1979). Both members of the pair participate in nest building. Cattails provide the most common nest material and cover. The female lays 7 to 12 eggs, commencing incubation before the clutch is completed. Incubation, shared by both sexes, takes 23 to 27 days. The male usually incubates during the night, and also assumes responsibility for night brooding of the young (Gullion 1954; Fredrickson 1970). Although chicks are precocious and nidifugous, they are brooded at the nest at least until all eggs hatch. The parents feed the young aquatic insect larvae while brooding and for several days after the young leave the nest. After the breeding period American Coots resume their gregarious ways. Small numbers, presumably migrants,

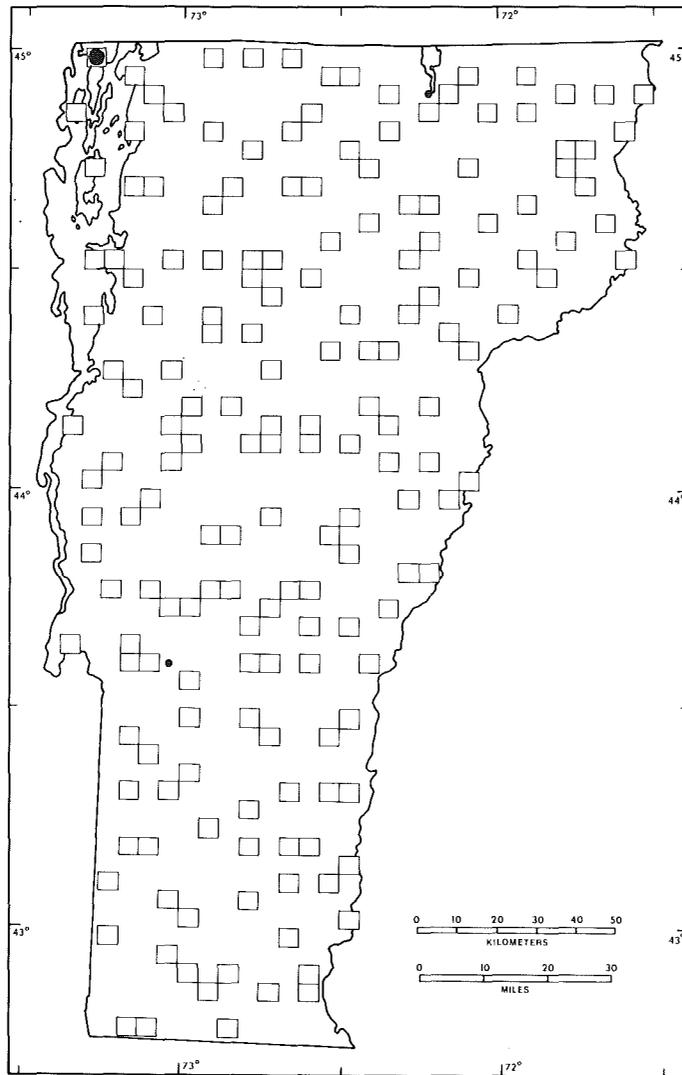


appear occasionally on Vermont lakes and ponds during the fall.

There are two confirmed breeding records for the state. The earliest and only pre-Atlas Project record was made at Lake Bomoseen (Cooke 1904). A brood of young observed at Mud Creek Wildlife Management Area in Alburg was the only confirmation during the Atlas Project period (ASR, N. King). Possible breeding was recorded in the cattail marshes of West Rutland Marsh, where 1 coot was heard and seen on June 6, 1980 (ASR, W. J. Norse); and in marshes of the South Bay of Lake Memphremagog, near the mouth of the Barton River, where 3 adults were seen on May 28, 1980 (ASR, G. F. Oatman).

In Vermont, the American Coot is a rare bird even during migration; during the 10 years covered by *Records of Vermont Birds* it occurred in 4 spring seasons, 2 summer seasons, 7 fall seasons (an average of 4 individuals per fall), and, surprisingly, in mid December on 2 Christmas Bird Counts on the Burlington waterfront (RVB, Winter 1973-82).

The American Coot is a member of the Rallidae, closely related to the Common Moorhen, the Sora, and the Virginia Rail; because of its behavior, however, it is often mistaken by the novice observer for a duck. During much of the year coots are gregarious and spend their time paddling around on ponds and along shores of lakes, feeding



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL 1 (0.6%)

Possible breeding: 0 (0% of total)

Probable breeding: 0 (0% of total)

Confirmed breeding: 1 (100% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	1	3	100
Green Mountains	0	0	0
North Central	0	0	0
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	0	0	0
Taconic Mountains	0	0	0
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

on aquatic vegetation. Although they have only lobed toes rather than the webbed feet of waterfowl, coots are strong swimmers and dive readily for submerged food. They are both prone to and subjects of kleptoparasitism—stealing water weeds from diving ducks whenever possible, while having food stolen from them by dabbling ducks. American Coots also often feed on land, grazing like geese on shore vegetation. Bulky birds, coots have difficulty becoming airborne, and a flotilla of them splattering madly across the surface in alarm is a comic sight. During the breeding season the American Coot becomes more stealthy, a fact that

may account for the limited number of documented breeding records in Vermont.

The American Coot has apparently always been a rare member of Vermont's breeding avifauna. The coot probably breeds only sporadically within the state, perhaps when populations in neighboring states increase enough to cause dispersal to Vermont. Vermont is not located on a major flyway for the species, and despite a plethora of habitat on Lake Champlain, the appearance of a coot in the state may be merely accidental.

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