

American Coot

Fulica americana

The waterborne American Coot is one good reminder that not everything that floats is a duck. A close look at a coot—that small head, those scrawny legs—reveals a different kind of bird entirely. Their dark bodies and white faces are common sights in nearly any open water across the continent, and they often mix with ducks. But they're closer relatives of the gangly Sandhill Crane and the nearly invisible rails than of Mallards or teal.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

The American Coot is a plump, chickenlike bird with a rounded head and a sloping bill. Their tiny tail, short wings, and large feet are visible on the rare occasions they take flight.

Color Pattern

Coots are dark-gray to black birds with a bright-white bill and forehead. The legs are yellow-green. At close range you may see a small patch of red on the forehead.

Behavior

You'll find coots eating aquatic plants on almost any body of water. When swimming they look like small ducks (and often dive), but on land they look more chickenlike, walking rather than waddling. An awkward and often clumsy flier, the American Coot requires long running takeoffs to get airborne.

Habitat

Look for American Coots at ponds in city parks, in marshes, reservoirs, along the edges of lakes, and in roadside ditches, sewage treatment ponds, and saltwater inlets or saltmarshes.

Cool Facts

- Although it swims like a duck, the American Coot does not have webbed feet like a duck. Instead, each one of the coot's long toes has broad lobes of skin that help it kick through the water. The broad lobes fold back each time the bird lifts its foot, so it doesn't impede walking on dry land, though it supports the bird's weight on mucky ground.
- The ecological impact of common animals, like this ubiquitous waterbird, can be impressive when you add it all up. One estimate from Back Bay, Virginia, suggested that the local coot population ate 216 tons (in dry weight) of vegetation per winter.

Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 15.5 - 16.9 inches
- Wingspan - 23 - 25 inches
- Weight - 21.2 - 24.7 ounces

