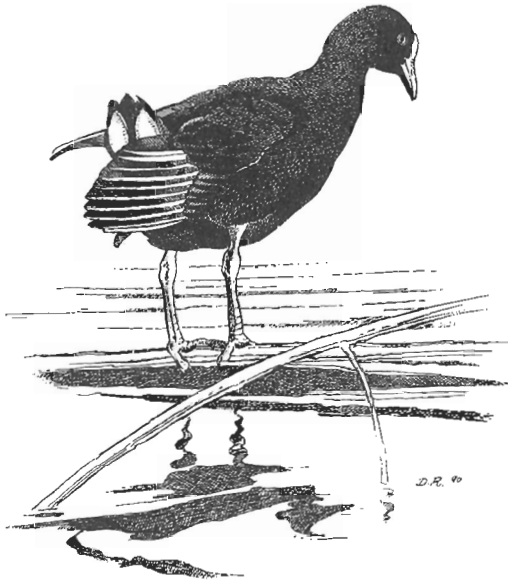


# AMERICAN COOT

*Fulica americana*



The American Coot, or “mud hen” as it is widely known to hunters, is a common to abundant migrant throughout Pennsylvania. When lakes and rivers remain free of ice, good numbers of coots may also winter in the state. However, in summer the coot is a decidedly rare bird, its distribution limited by the need for large marshy areas in which to nest. Volunteers were able to “confirm” the American Coot as a breeding species in just 11 Atlas blocks.

In Pennsylvania, American Coots often set up their breeding territories along the edge of an open pool in a cattail marsh or, less commonly, in a large bed of spatterdock (Trimble 1940; Grimm 1952; pers. obs.). The species associates closely with such marsh birds as the American and Least bitterns, Virginia Rail, Sora, Common Moorhen, and Marsh Wren. The coot normally nests nearer to open water than the others.

As soon as marsh vegetation has grown high enough to provide nesting material, both sexes undertake nest construction (Fredrickson 1970). The coot’s nest is usually a bulky floating structure attached to the surrounding marsh plants and consisting of any material available (Bent 1926; Gullion 1954; Fredrickson 1970). Although sometimes built in the open, the nest is more often well concealed by vegetation. Both dry and fresh cattails and rushes over a foundation of sticks were reportedly used to construct nests at Pymatuning (Todd 1940; Trimble 1940); this assortment is probably typical of nests elsewhere in Pennsylvania.

However, nests are not always located in marshes. The coot was “confirmed” at Erie when an occupied nest that had been built on a platform on a boat was photographed at the public dock (J. H. Stull pers. com. 1989)! In addition to the egg nest, coots may construct display platforms and brood nests (Gullion 1954). Where they are plentiful, muskrat lodges may be used as the base for these secondary structures (Fredrickson 1970).

Very few early records exist of the American Coot nesting in Pennsylvania. Stone (1894) called it an “occasional summer resident” on the basis of a nest collected on an island in the Lehigh River near Bethlehem in 1875; Warren (1890) mentions it as “native” in Mercer County. However, Harlow (1918) wrote, “I can find no evidence of its nesting in Pennsylvania at the present time.”

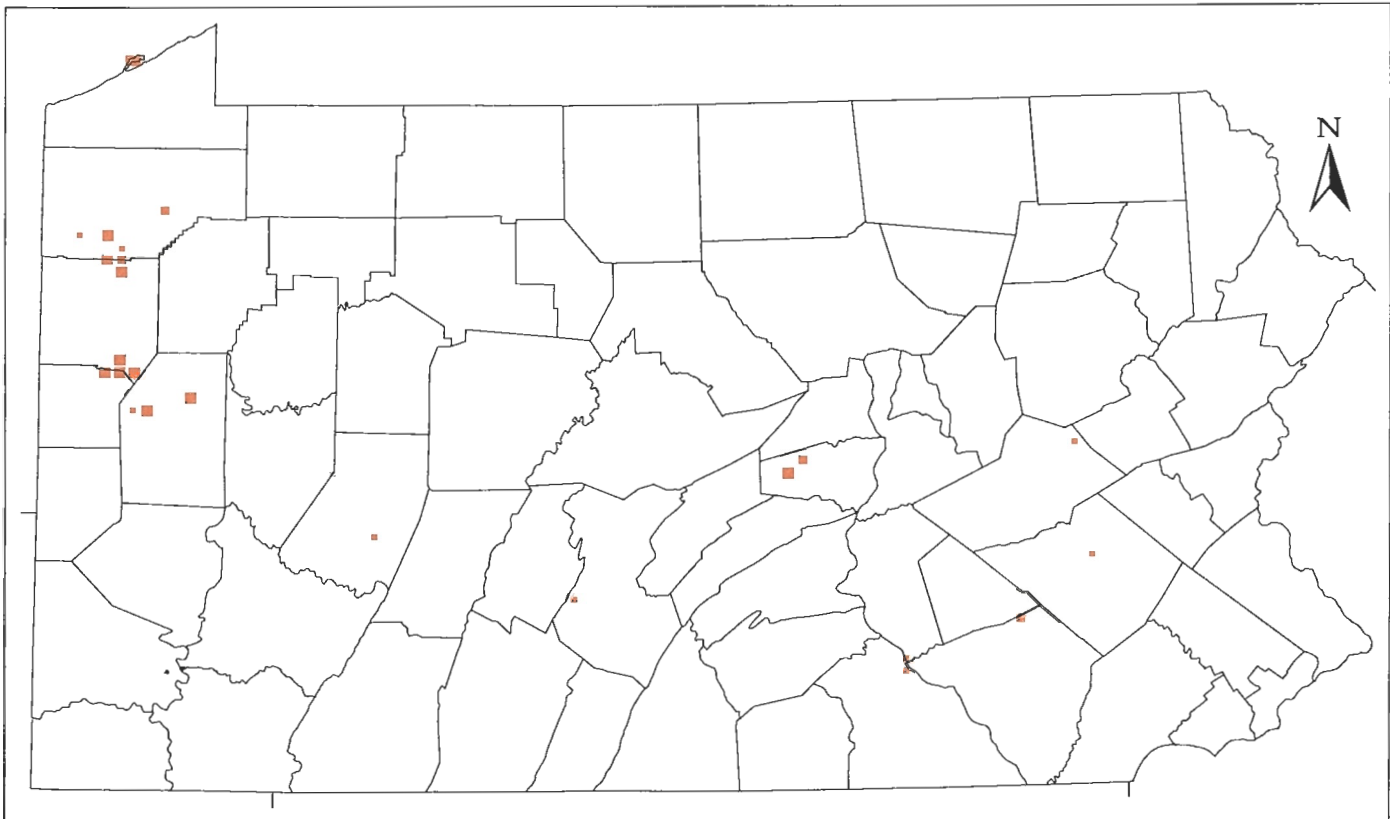
The first nesting confirmation in western Pennsylvania was in 1923, when Sutton (1928b) saw an adult and two small young coots in a marsh north of Hartstown, Crawford County; coots have apparently nested irregularly in this same area ever since (Grimm 1952; pers. obs.). With the gradual flooding of the newly created Pymatuning Lake starting in 1932, a vast sea of cattails became a haven for nesting coots. As Trimble (1937) observed of the years 1935 and 1936, “coots became so numerous and their floating nests were so often and so easily found that they were no longer a novelty.” With a decline of the marshes at the end of that decade, however, American Coots again became scarce, infrequent breeders in the wetlands of western Crawford County (Todd 1940; Grimm 1952).

At the Tincum marshes in Delaware County, an adult with a brood of downy young was seen in July 1933 (Debes 1934). Nests were found there in 1952 and 1953 (Poole unpub. ms.), and again in 1978 (Miller 1979b). Elsewhere, Street (1954) considered the coot a rare breeder in the Poconos, and Wood (1983) recorded a nesting from Centre County.

Although the American Coot is a potential breeding species anywhere in the state where sufficient marshland exists, the best conditions were found within and just southeast of the Glaciated Section of northwestern Pennsylvania during the Atlas fieldwork. Volunteers counted three broods of coots in a marsh on Game Lands no. 284 in Mercer County. The only “confirmed” record outside northwestern Pennsylvania was at Taylor Lake, Snyder County, where several young were seen with adult birds in 1985. Observations of migrant nonbreeding birds lingering into the summer months are frequent, so “possible” and “probable” records elsewhere in the state should be viewed with caution.

An American Coot nest with five eggs was found in Delaware County as early as 15 May (Poole unpub. ms.); nests have been located at Pymatuning between 16 and 30 May

AMERICAN COOT				Physiographic Regions in Which Recorded		
No. of Blocks in Which Recorded	No.	% of Total	Priority Blocks	No.	% of Region	
	25	<1	<1	Appalachian Plateau	13	<1
■ Possible	10	40	50	Pittsburgh Plateau Section	3	<1
■ Probable	4	16	0	Blue Ridge	0	0
■ Confirmed	11	44	50	Central Lowland	1	3
				Coastal Plain	0	0
				New England	0	0
				Piedmont	3	<1
				Valley and Ridge	5	<1



(Todd 1940). An Atlas volunteer observed half-grown young at Conneaut Marsh as late as 16 August.

Well-flooded emergent vegetation is essential to the American Coot's nesting success (Sugden 1979). Maintaining a high and constant water level in wildlife management areas during the breeding season should help to encourage

this and many other species of marsh birds. In areas with a particularly high density of nesting water birds, limiting human recreational activities during the critical breeding period also would contribute substantially to nesting success.

—Robert C. Leberman