

Conservation Corner

By Corinne Peterson
Pocahontas County Naturalist



October 25, 2017

Last week I joined the Newell-Fonda Biology Class at Sunken Grove for an outdoor classroom focusing on biotic and abiotic factors in the environment. We were easily able to come up with 26 different relationships, one for each student, present in the shallow lake, woodland, and restored prairie habitats. One of the most visual and auditory relationships was the one featuring migrating waterfowl as thousands of coots gathered for a pre-migration party on the open water. Let's invite this tough, adaptable, familiar wetland bird, the American Coot, to be this week's bird friend.



Many people assume that because coots float like ducks they are members of the duck family. Not so. American Coots belong to the *Rallidae* family along with rails and gallinules and are more closely related to sandhill cranes than to mallards. Coots are the most aquatic, most abundant, and most widely distributed species of rail.

Coots are easy to identify with their plump, chicken-like bodies, rounded heads, slate gray bodies, and white faces and bills. They have scrawny, yellow-green legs, and their feet are lobed, not webbed. These broad lobes power their swimming strokes and support their weight on mucky ground but will fall back out of the way for walking. You may know coots by their common name mud hens, not to be confused with the Toledo Mud Hens, the Detroit Tigers AAA Minor League baseball team named for, you guessed it, the many American Coots living in marshlands near their first ballpark.

Coots are slow, meticulous foragers, plucking at plants while walking, swimming, dabbing, or diving. Coots are omnivorous, dining mostly on aquatic plants such as algae, duckweed, sedges, and cattails, but they will also dine on land plants, oak and elm leaves, as well as insects, crustaceans, snails, tadpoles, and salamanders. And while adept at swimming and diving, coots are clumsy fliers and need a running start and many yards of open water to become airborne.

Coots weave a basket nest on a floating platform hidden among the cattails and bulrushes. Both parents will incubate the 8-12 eggs and aggressively defend the nest against predators such as crows and muskrats. Coot chicks are precocial, alert and ready for their first swim in 6 hours. Did you know a group of coots is called a cover or raft?

American Coots are common and widespread across North America with stable populations. Coots are not a favorite of hunters as many people consider them inedible. Like many wetland species, coots accumulate toxins caused by agricultural runoff as well as industrial and nuclear waste in their bodies.

Scientists often monitor the plentiful coots as a means of monitoring these pollutants in the environment at large.

Mid-lesson, an American Bald Eagle suddenly appeared, soaring majestically over the water, scattering the coots every which way. Probably a good plan, as coots may locally comprise 80% of bald eagle diets.

The students enjoyed their time observing and interacting with nature. Have you visited an area wetland this fall?

