

Night Use by Ducklings of Active American Coot, *Fulica americana*, Nests

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Two active American Coot nests visited during the night were found to contain ducklings. The coot clutches subsequently hatched normally.

Key Words: American Coot, *Fulica americana*, inter-specific nest use.

As part of a study of territorial aggression in the American Coot (*Fulica americana*) I trapped coots on nests using potter traps (Crawford 1977) at the Creston Valley Wildlife Management Area in Creston, British Columbia (49°05'N, 116°35'W). Trapping was done at night between 22:00 and 03:00 hours to maximize the proportion of males caught (Gullion 1954; Crawford 1977). I placed 35 traps on 25 nests between 5 May 1991 and 18 July 1991. Throughout this time there were eight additional instances in which trapping was planned but was cancelled upon arriving at the nest due to predation, pipping eggs, and other unforeseen events.

One of the cancelled trappings occurred on the night of 11 July. Sometime between 22:00 and 24:00, I arrived at nest P2N14b to place a trap on a nest which contained five coot eggs, four days from hatching. I did not see either resident coot at the nest. Instead, eight to 12 young ducklings began to empty out of the nest cup. They were dabbling ducks, either Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*), Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*), Blue-winged Teal (*Anas discors*) or Green-winged Teal (*A. crecca*) (more accurate identification was not possible in the dark, but Wood Duck broods were most often seen in this area during the day). I saw no sign of adult ducks or coots during my approach to or departure from the nest.

A similar event occurred on the night of 16 July. I visited nest P3N25 between 22:00 and 23:00 to place a trap over six eggs. No adults were present when I arrived, but the eggs were warm. When I arrived to remove the trap, between 2:30 and 3:00, I found three large ducklings inside. The ducklings were about five to six weeks old, two-thirds adult size, and were dabblers of some sort. As in the first incident, the nest and eggs were undamaged. Coots at both nests subsequently hatched and fledged chicks from their nests. No indication of incompetence was seen in their subsequent parental behaviour.

Although the motivation for the ducklings to roost on a dry platform in the middle of a marsh is understandable, the coots' behaviour was peculiar. At night a coot is much more visible off its nest than on it (personal observation) and would likely be exposed to a

much greater risk of predation. The only evident predation of coots were night attacks by Great Horned Owls (*Bubo virginianus*). Both hunting owls and the remains of coots were seen regularly during my night wanderings in the marsh. If coots do have to leave the nest at night to feed, find their mate, or pursue extra-pair copulations, it may be beneficial to allow duckling broods on the eggs rather than let the eggs sit uncovered. In any case, I think it highly unlikely that ducklings force coots off the nest. American Coots are pugnacious birds and highly intolerant of interspecific intruders on their territories (Gullion 1952, 1953; Ryder 1959). Wood Ducks with broods seem to be subject to particularly intense attacks (personal observation). How often ducklings sit in coot nests and, how long they stay if undisturbed are interesting questions in light of the antagonistic behaviour coots display towards them during the day.

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