

(Figure 1). We concluded that this coot must have strayed off its usual paths somewhere on the south coast where it had become habituated to human presence and blundered into the relative wilderness of Cortes Island, expecting to be treated by people in the accustomed way.



FIRST NESTING RECORD FOR AMERICAN COOT ON CORTES ISLAND, BRITISH COLUMBIA

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Ever since my wife Aileen and I moved to Swamp's Edge on Cortes Island, British Columbia in 1978 American Coots (*Fulica americana*) have been a familiar presence in the Beaver (*Castor canadensis*) pond that occupies the center of our property. Indeed, during our very first year, we were amazed by an uncommonly bold individual, we flippantly named "Flipper", who would exit the water and literally attack us, demanding to be fed!

Figure 1. The author with "Flipper", the bold and aggressive American Coot, at Swamp's Edge on Cortes Island, BC. Winter 1978 (Aileen C. Douglas). BC Photo 3659a.

Since those early days, a single coot has been a regular feature of autumn at Swamp's Edge, where it would hang around until the first freeze-up drove it away. All this changed on 23 April 2007, when one individual provided us with our first spring time record. After about a week of exploring the pond, this bird constructed a floating nest platform, anchored at the edge of a large patch of the emergent aquatic plant *Scirpus lacustris* (also known as common tulle and hardstem bulrush) in plain view of our house. The entries in our journal for the next days and weeks

range from : “Coot, very vocal at first light” to “Coot, calling his heart out night and day” to “Coot, as usual ...” We definitely lost sleep throughout May and well into June, as our bedroom window opens out towards the pond, with the coot’s stage being only about 40 m away. We had never heard a coot’s mating call before and were absolutely amazed by the clarion-intensity of the trumpeting. As summer progressed, the coot’s behaviour changed. The bird became aggressive towards the smaller duck species in the pond, particularly female Wood Ducks (*Aix sponsa*). Eventually, by August, the coot quieted down and its movements became somewhat secretive. Finally, in September, it was joined by a second American Coot. The two birds’ interactions were casual and neutral. Eventually, the start of December brought snow and ice to Swamp’s Edge, and, as in previous years, the coot(s) departed.

On 7 March 2008, one coot returned and immediately assumed its station on the platform at the edge of the tule patch. We braced ourselves for sleepless nights to come, but, four days later, a second coot appeared. The birds’ interactions were peaceful, almost disinterested. As it turned out, they were being discreet. Around the middle of April, we took note of the fact that we had not seen both coots together for awhile, and, on 1 May, the pair emerged from the cover of the *Scirpus*, and, eventually we were able to count seven chicks.

This constitutes the first nesting record of American Coot on Cortes Island and the Canadian Gulf Islands. While the species breeds locally on southeastern Vancouver Island and the adjacent southwest mainland coast (Campbell et al. 1990) it is considered primarily a winter visitor to the Canadian Gulf Islands (Fraser 1989).

The presence of a nesting pair of America Coot changed the atmosphere in the pond completely - an altogether new level of strife and competition dominated the days and interrupted the nights. Both parent birds exhibited very strong aggression towards other pond birds. Red-winged Blackbirds (*Agelaius phoeniceus*) were targeted and especially the resident pair of Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*), but even Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*) seemed to be fair game. We saw the blackbirds mobbing the coots in desperate attempts to keep them away from

their nests. We did find one killed blackbird chick and are pretty sure it was the victim of a nest-raid by the coots. Such highly territorial behaviour is amply documented in the literature (see Brisbin et al. 2002).

Our local pair of Pied-billed Grebes had been setting two consecutive nesting records in 2006 (Gronau 2006) and 2007 by successfully fledging three broods each of those two seasons. The nests of Pied-billed Grebes are constructed and located in an almost identical manner to those of American Coots, and given the small area of available cover (the tule patch is a little less than one hectare in extent), competition seems inevitable. Jill Seaton of the Jasper Environmental Association (pers. comm.) reports witnessing aggressive confrontations between American Coots and Pied-billed Grebes on Pyramid Lake, near Jasper, Alberta. We certainly saw some dramatic fights between the two species. Grebes are feisty birds in their own right, as we have also observed prolonged harrassment of Ring-necked Ducks (*Aythya collaris*) by them, so the grebes did stand up to the coots’ aggression.

One particularly memorable altercation between the two species looked like it was going to end in a draw when the second coot joined the fight and the grebe gave up. The coot’s behaviour was noteworthy. A coot would rush towards the adversary, suddenly thrust its legs forward and skid on its tail feathers while its flailing feet raked the grebe. As a consequence of these relentless confrontations, the grebes produced their first batch of hatchlings on 27 June, almost two months later than the previous year. The grebes kept their young hidden and three weeks later we were able to count five chicks. There may have been a second nesting attempt by the grebes as we heard nestling vocalizations on 20 September but after a few days the sounds stopped, and we did not see any chicks.

The Red-winged Blackbirds’ nesting success was also impeded by the coots’ breeding activities as they suffered a reduction of approximately 30% in their hatching numbers.

The coots, for their part, proved to be exceptional parents. They kept their young well concealed in the *Scirpus* for the first couple of weeks, making photographic documentation difficult (Figure 2). The

colour-stylings of young coots, unfortunately, cannot be conveyed well by black-and-white photographs. The scarlets, oranges and yellows dabbling the newly hatched chicks' heads and throats have a distinct punk-appeal.



Figure 2. Small downy American Coot chicks emerging from *Scirpus* at Swamp's Edge on Cortes Island, BC. This constitutes the first breeding record for the Canadian Gulf Islands. 12 May 2008 (Christian W. Gronau). BC Photo 3659b.

Our first reliable count was 3 June when we saw seven chicks. The young grew quickly and were just as aggressive as their parents, trying to chase even Wood Ducks. On 21 June, a second batch of American Coot chicks appeared (Figure 3), which was almost a week before we heard the first Pied-billed Grebe chicks. The coot parents seemed a bit more habituated to our presence the second time around, and it was easier to count the chicks, again seven in total.

The first brood was by now about eight weeks old and appeared fully grown and was no longer tolerated by their parents, who lavished all their attention upon the new family. The parents continued to be very aggressive for several weeks, but slowly, as the young matured, the pond became a much more peaceful place again.

By the middle of October, most summer ducks had left the pond. A variety of transients spent varying amounts of time in the pond, and soon the first winter ducks had arrived. We counted a total of



Figure 3. Adult American Coot with four of the seven downy chicks of the second brood feeding at Swamp's Edge on Cortes Island, BC. 24 June 2008 (Christian W. Gronau). BC Photo 3659c.

12 American Coots, which suggests that of the total of 14 hatched young at least 10 matured to adult size. Very little aggression was evident within the group during the autumn period. Even the adult Pied-billed Grebes could be observed paddling peacefully in the immediate vicinity of the coots. We do not know how many Pied-billed Grebe young survived but we did see two on adjacent Anvil Lake on 22 October.

The presence of breeding American Coots certainly changed the atmosphere of Swamp's Edge considerably. The literature is full of disparaging remarks about American Coots. Ehrlich et al. (1988) wrote: "American Coots are noted for many qualities, some considerably less redeeming than others" ... "since coots are neither comical, vulnerable, nor inspirational, the public is often unsympathetic to their problems." While we do not subscribe to such anthropocentric judgments and evaluations of nature, we nonetheless now understand how the American Coot may have earned its reputation.

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About the Author

Christian studied palaeontology in Germany and worked as a mine geologist in the Great Bear Lake area in the Northwest Territories, where he also met his wife Aileen. They are naturalists who have lived for over 30 years off-the-grid on Cortes Island, where they operate a small, strictly beach-based shellfish farm.
