

CARIBBEAN COOT COLLECTED IN SOUTHERN FLORIDA

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The range of the Caribbean Coot (*Fulica caribaea*) includes northwestern Venezuela, Curacao, the Antilles (but rare in Cuba and other islands in the western Caribbean), and probably Trinidad and Tobago (Ridgway 1941, Bond 1971, French 1973). This species is similar in plumage and habits to the American Coot (*F. americana*), which occurs regularly in the Bahamas and Greater Antilles but sparingly in the eastern Caribbean as a migrant.

A Caribbean Coot found by Walter George among several hundred American Coots in a flooded borrow pit in Oakland Park, Broward County, Florida, on 28 January 1974, was the first ever reported in the United States. Presumably it was this same bird that was later seen by many observers, including the writer, and photographed by William J. Bolte. In carefully checking all coots in this area through May 1974, Bolte (1974 and pers. comm.) identified 4 additional individuals as *F. caribaea*. Each *F. caribaea* tended to remain within a given area on the borrow pit. By 9 May all but one had left. During the same period, 2 others were discovered, one at Hollywood, Broward County, and another at Crandon Park, Key Biscayne, Dade County. Color photographs were taken of 7 *F. caribaea*. Two of these photographs were sent to the American Museum of Natural History and the U.S. National Museum and the identification confirmed. No Caribbean Coots were reported from Florida from late May through September 1974. From October 1974 through February 1975, sight records of *F. caribaea* have been made at widely scattered localities in peninsular Florida, mainly by Bolte (pers. comm.) and some by the writer, to include the following counties: Alachua, Brevard, Broward, Dade, Hillsborough, Monroe, Orange, and Palm Beach. A total of 14 was recorded on the 1974 Christmas Bird Counts; one each at Cocoa, Lakeland, and Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, 3 at West Palm Beach, and 8 at Ft. Lauderdale. Whether these fall and winter sightings represent some of the same individuals seen earlier in 1974 is not known.

On 2 April 1974 at 1430 EDT I collected an immature male *F. caribaea* on the borrow pit at Oakland Park. This individual was referred to by Bolte (*op. cit.*) as bird "No. 2" and was not photographed in the wild. The skin and partial skeleton are now no. 567252 at the U.S. National Museum. This specimen, the first taken in the United States, was collected while it was feeding on *Hydrilla (Hydrilla verticillata)*, an introduced submergent aquatic. The coot

weighed 747 g and was extremely fat. The wing (unflattened) measured 187 mm, the tarsus 62.5 mm, and the middle toe (without nail) 67.9 mm. The left testis measured 10 x 4 mm, the right 9.5 x 5 mm. Bill and frontal shield measurements (from fresh specimen) were culmen, including shield, 52 mm; length of shield from base of upper mandible to distal edge of crown, 20.5 mm; nostril to distal edge of shield, 31 mm; width of upper mandible at base, 13 mm; and greatest width of shield at base of bill, 12.5 mm. On June 1975 the exposed culmen, including the shield, measured 49.3 mm (Laybourne pers. comm.), indicating shrinkage of the shield of 2.7 mm as the specimen dried. Color of frontal shield, based on the fresh specimen examined in direct sunlight, following the Villalobos system (as depicted in Palmer 1962), was straw yellow, most intense at distal margin and fading to white at base of the upper mandible with some narrow blurred brownish red streaks near the distal portion. The shield was soft and fleshy, coming to a broad shallow point at the crown.

The shields of the coots identified as *F. caribaea* in Florida exhibit much variability as discussed and illustrated by Bolte (*op. cit.*). Gullion (1951) in his work on *F. americana* in California found the frontal shield to be highly variable in shape and size among individuals and even in the same individual, depending upon whether it was in breeding or non-breeding condition. Gill (1964) in his study of *F. americana peruviana* and *F. ardesiaca* in the Andes of Peru found mixed pairs breeding and presented other evidence that led him to conclude that they are conspecific. The primary difference between the two is the color of the frontal shield. He further suggested that a similar situation may exist with *F. americana grenadensis* and *F. caribaea* in the West Indies, where the relationship has not been satisfactorily resolved. A number of coots in the southeastern part of Florida have shields intermediate in size, shape, and amount of reddish markings (not a callus) between those of *americana* and *caribaea*, suggesting possible polymorphism, if not hybridization or introgression. It is now apparent that, with the Caribbean Coot widespread in Florida, a review of its taxonomic status is needed.

The source of Caribbean Coots in Florida is not known. It seems unlikely that the Caribbean birds would be kept in captivity, because they are so similar to the abundant and widespread American Coot, the latter being common in zoo and private collections and readily available. The size, shape, color of frontal shield (white at a distance, but straw yellow and occasionally pinkish when viewed closely in the field or in the hand), and absence of the reddish brown callus at the top of the shield in *F. caribaea*, enable one to distinguish the two

species under good viewing conditions. The growing intensity of field work in recent years has revealed an increasing number of West Indian strays in the State. I suspect that the Caribbean Coot has been present in small numbers in Florida over the years but has been overlooked.

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