

Caribbean Coot, *Fulica caribaea*, in Florida

William J. Bolte*

A Caribbean Coot *Fulica caribaea* was discovered on January 28, 1974 on a borrow pit lake in northwest Fort Lauderdale, Broward County, Fla., by Wally George. The lake is in the center of a residential development within two miles of the Atlantic Coast.

The next day I took a series of photographs of the bird as it fed on *Hydrilla* within ten meters of the shore. It had a pale yellow shield with two very small spots of rusty brown on the top right edge of the shield. I sent photographs for deposit in support of the record to the National Museum of Natural History and the American Museum of Natural History. Dr. Alexander Wetmore, Roxie C. Laybourne and Dr. W. E. Lanyon and others have concurred in the identification. This appears to be the first record of the Caribbean Coot in the United States.

On Feb. 10 I found a second Caribbean Coot on the same lake. Its shield was a pale yellow with a slight diagonal slash of rusty brown on the upper portion.

On Mar. 18 a third bird was found by Mr. and Mrs. Mark Trafton on a small pond in Crandon Park, and was photographed by me on March 21. Its shield was bright yellow with several vertical streaks of rusty brown on upper face and edge.

Pictures sent to both museums confirmed it as a Caribbean Coot.

At this point it was decided that the second bird should be collected, and on Apr. 2 this was done by Paul Sykes with Wally George and this writer in attendance. The specimen was sent to the National Museum of Natural History where it was identified as an immature male Caribbean Coot.

Also on Apr. 2 I discovered coot number 4 at the borrow pit. Its shield was completely white, lacking any yellow or rusty brown as in previous birds. This bird was consequently seen by many observers.

On Apr. 7, while checking a declining coot population, I discovered birds 5 and 6 (or the 4th and 5th birds for the borrow pit). The shield of bird 5 was pale yellow with two large rusty brown splotches separated by a vertical line of yellow in the center of the shield. The brown was somewhat translucent, allowing the yellow to bleed through. The top of the shield extended noticeably further back than any other coot that I had observed. The number 6 bird had an all-white shield with a small corner of rusty brown at the top left side. Both of these birds were seen on the same day by Jan Bolte and Wally George from approximately 15 meters.

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On Apr. 10 I discovered bird 7 on a small pond at the Hollywood Blvd. Turnpike exit. Its shield was all white, and as in all previous birds, quite bulbous.

From Jan. 29 through May 9 I observed the birds on a daily basis for a total of 147 hours. The bird at Crandon Park was last seen on Mar. 16. The first appreciable decline in the American Coot population started on Mar. 31, dropping from about 800 birds to 310; on Apr. 7, 268; on Apr. 12, 145; on Apr. 14, 91. On Apr. 16 there was a drop to 78 birds, including the first Caribbean Coot. On Apr. 19 there was a drop to 36 birds, including Caribbean Coots 5, 6 and 7. Five American Coots and the number 4 Caribbean Coot were still present on May 9.

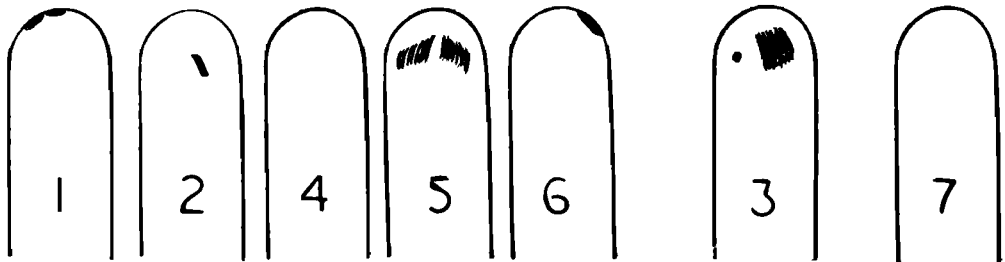
The Caribbean Coot and the American Coot are quite similar except for the frontal shield, which in the Caribbean Coot is broader, higher and bulbous. It appears to vary in color from white to bright yellow, sometimes tinged with rusty brown. A dark red plate covers the upper part of the shield of the American Coot. Care should be used in identification. Of about 4500 American Coots checked, three showed a slightly

swollen shield, with only a small amount of dark red at the extreme top with the shield terminating in front of the eye, difficult to observe even at close range. An American Coot at a distance could be mistaken for a Caribbean Coot. The intermediate frontal shield characteristics noted in a small proportion of the American Coots in southeastern Florida suggests possible hybridization between the two species. Bond (1942 *Proc. Acad. Nat. Sci. Philadelphia* 94: 93-94, 1956 loc. cit.) mentions apparent hybrid individuals from Cuba, Haiti and St. Croix.

This species is found throughout most of the West Indies, but is rare in Cuba and has not been reported in the Bahamas.

At least two other West Indian species have been observed on the mainland of South Florida this past winter; the Masked Duck at Loxahatchee Wildlife Refuge, discovered on Jan 15 and last seen on Apr. 20, and the Bahama Pintail at Flamingo in Everglades National Park on Jan 14 and photographed by me on Apr. 21.

The shields on the seven Caribbean Coots appeared as follows:



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