

American Coot *Fulica americana*

The American Coot is one of America's most successful water birds, common in San Diego County as a breeding species and abundant as a winter visitor. An ability to graze on lawns preadapted the coot to urbanization, to some extent. Nesting birds need marshes around fresh or brackish water, but winter

visitors spread to salt water and ponds with little surrounding vegetation.

Breeding distribution: The coot breeds throughout San Diego County's coastal slope wherever there are freshwater marshes and ponds. Breeding birds are most numerous around lakes in the coastal lowland (up to 200 at Lake Hodges, K10, 14 June 1999, R. L. Barber; 100 at O'Neill

Lake, E6, 19 April 1999 and 30 July 2001, P. A. Ginsburg) and at Buena Vista Lagoon (up to 318 in the west basin, H5, 10 August 1999, M. Freda). The lack of tidal influence and abundant cattail surrounding Buena Vista make it the best coot habitat among the county's coastal wetlands. Nevertheless, the coot still breeds to some extent in brackish lagoons, as attested by two chicks on the north shore of Batiquitos Lagoon (J7) 4 May 2001, after the restoration of tidal flushing there (C. C. Gorman).

If it contains water, even San Diego County's highest lake, Big Laguna at 5400 feet (O23), supports breeding coots (up to 65 on 7 July 2001, J. R. Barth). In the Anza-Borrego Desert, coots remain into spring only sporadically at ponds in the Borrego Valley. During the atlas period such records were of single individuals only, with only two later than 17 April (E24 and G24; 4 and 6 May 2000, P. D. Ache). The coot has been confirmed nesting in the Anza-Borrego Desert just once, on 19 May 1974, when a newly hatched chick was seen with its parents at Oso Ranch in the north Borrego Valley (E24; ABDSP database).

Nesting: The American Coot nests over water in matted vegetation. Though the nest is often hidden within a marsh, the coot nests closer to edges than other California



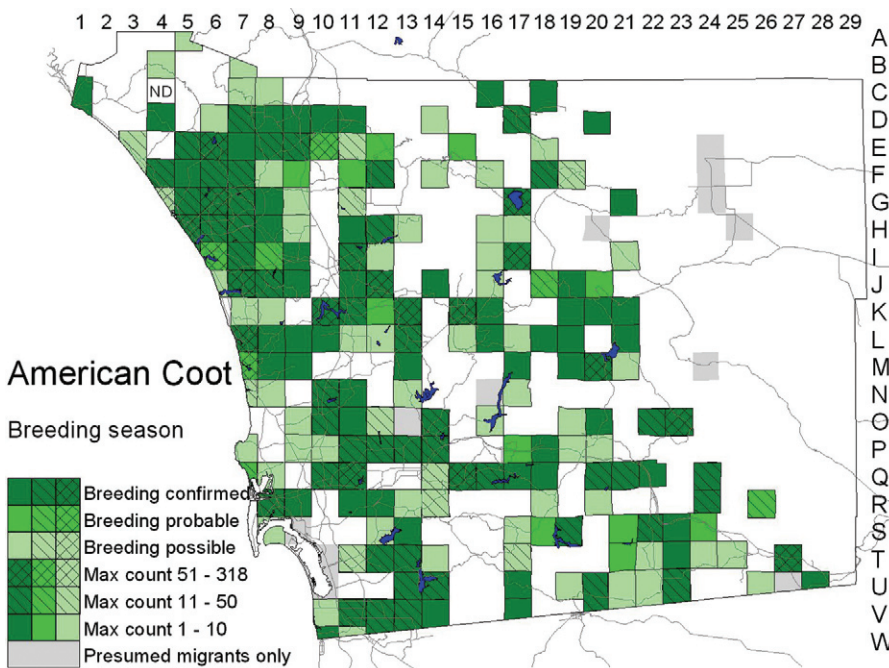
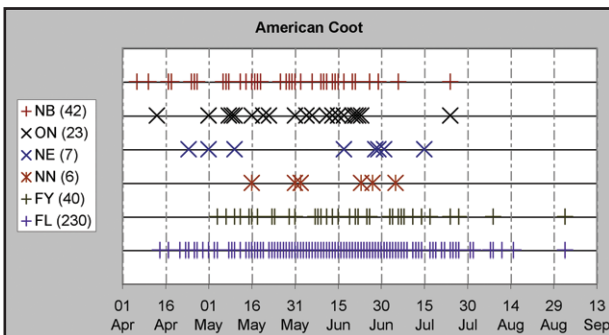
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

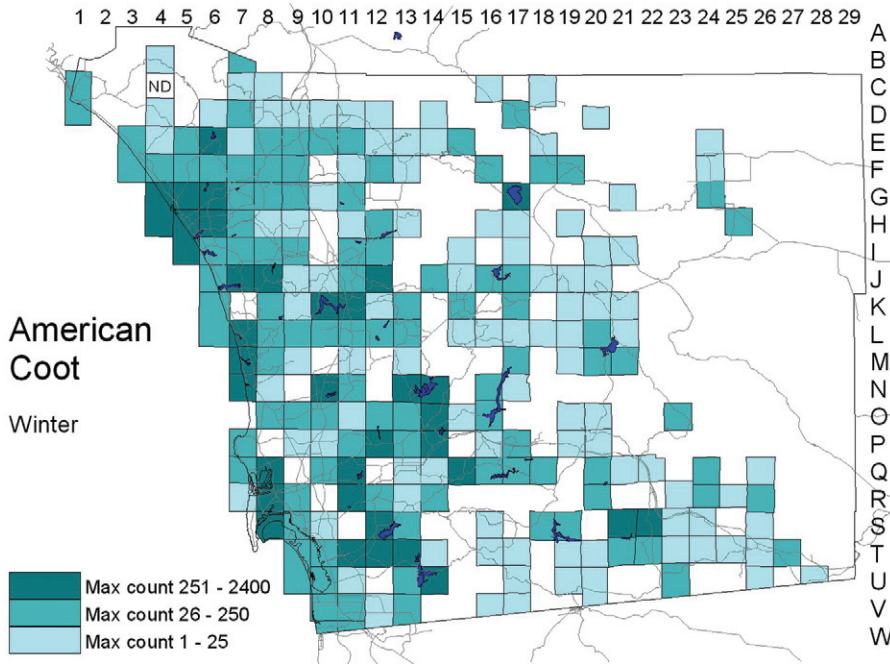
species of the family Rallidae, so atlas observers saw many more coot nests than they did of the other species. Chicks, however, accounted for most of our confirmations of coot breeding. Coots evidently begin nesting in the third week of March, as we noted chicks as early as 14 April; they leave the nest just a day or two after hatching. An occupied nest as late as 24 July translates to egg laying no earlier than 1 July. We observed young being fed by their parents as late as 2 September.

Migration: Coots begin moving into habitat where they do not breed as early as 11 August (1993, 16 in the south San Diego Bay salt works, V10, Stadlander and Konecny 1994) but arrive gradually, perhaps not reaching full abundance until late October or early November (432 at Batiquitos Lagoon, J6/J7, 27 October 1997, Merkel and Associates 1998; 460 at San Elijo Lagoon, L7, 26 October 1992, P. Unitt). King et al. (1987) found that numbers at San Elijo Lagoon peaked from November to January. One coot at the Borrego Springs Country Club (G24) 5 September 1998 (P. D. Jorgensen) provided the species' earliest fall record for the Anza-Borrego Desert.

In spring, wintering coots remain common until early April (667 at Batiquitos Lagoon 3 April 1997; 402 there the following day, Merkel and Associates 1998) but depart soon after that. Almost all are gone after the third week of April. Migrants have been noted in the Anza-Borrego Desert from 21 March (2001, two in Vallecito Valley, M24, P. K. Nelson) to 17 April (1999, one at the Borrego sewage ponds, H25, H. L. Young, M. B. Mosher).

A small number of nonbreeders remains on salt water through the summer (three sightings of single individuals on central San Diego Bay 9 May–27 June 1994, Preston and Mock 1995; three at Shelter Island, S8, 5 July 1998, P. Unitt).





ators). The landscaped shores of Mission Bay are especially attractive, accounting for our highest winter numbers (up to 2400 in the northeast quadrant of the bay, Q8, 21 December 1998, J. C. Worley). On sheltered salt water where lawns are not close by, the coot occurs in much smaller numbers. Around south San Diego Bay outside the salt works, Macdonald et al. (1990) had no daily count greater than 50. Within the salt works, Stadlander and Konecny (1994) had no more than 10 wintering coots per weekly survey 1993–94, but from 1997 to 2001 Christmas bird counts in this area yielded up to 131 on 18 December 1999 (D. C. Seals et al.).

Winter: Huge numbers of coots migrate into San Diego County for the winter. Even at the species’ prime breeding sites, numbers are far higher in winter (up to 2100 in the west basin of Buena Vista Lagoon 26 December 1998, M. B. Stowe; 2000 at O’Neill Lake 1 and 4 December 2000, P. A. Ginsburg). The coot is no more restricted elevationally in winter than in summer, with up to 150 at Big Laguna Lake 18 January 1998, P. Unitt).

In the Anza–Borrego Desert wintering coots are restricted to ponds in the Borrego Valley, where they are irregularly common (highest count 70 in the Ram’s Hill development 20 December 1998, R. Halford).

A habitat that coots exploit in winter but not summer is lawns (which they graze like cattle) near water (in which they take refuge from disturbance and pred-

Conservation: Data to suggest a trend in numbers of coots breeding in San Diego County are insufficient. But as a winter visitor the species has likely increased, since it takes such advantage of reservoirs, ponds, cemeteries, and the county’s many and proliferating golf courses. Among San Diego County’s Christmas bird counts, results from Escondido and Anza–Borrego suggest an increase. The Anza–Borrego count averaged 5.6 coots from 1985 to 1996, 59.2 from 1997 to 2001. In some places in California, coots have been considered a nuisance and subjected to pest control (Brisbin and Mowbray 2002).

Taxonomy: Nominate *F. a. americana* Gmelin, 1789, is the subspecies of American Coot that covers the North American continent.