Text and images extracted from Heather, B.D. & Robertson, H.A. (2005) The Field Guide to the Birds of New Zealand. Penguin Books, Auckland. Pages 90, 91, 283, 291.

Birds of marsh and open water. Most are black, brown and purple-blue. Sexes alike. Wings short and broad. The bill extends onto their forehead as a shield, usually with diagnostic colour. Their strong legs and long toes aid walking on floating vegetation. Toes may be lobed (coots) for specialised swimming. They run well, walk with flicking tail, exposing a white undertail, and swim with bobbing head.

AUSTRALIAN COOT Fulica atra

Locally common native

38 cm; \circlearrowleft 570 g, \lozenge 520 g. Black with white bill and shield. No white under tail. Eye red; legs dark grey, feet lobed. Immature dark brown-grey, shield small and pinkish grey. Mainly aquatic; swims with head jerking back and forth, dives with a short forward jump to pluck submerged aquatic plants, patters across the surface as it labours to take off. Sometimes comes ashore to graze on short grass. Often in flocks. Main call a loud harsh 'krark'. **Habitat:** Small freshwater lakes and shallow bays of larger lakes. **Breeding:** Aug–Mar. [Sp 165]





About 140 species, of which 8 breed in New higher and show good ability to colonise Zealand. Midden evidence shows that 8 isolated islands. Island forms tend to become

flightless.

RAILS, GALLINULES and COOTS

BLACK-TAILED NATIVE-HEN

settlement, and the Chatham Island Rail Rallus modestus became extinct in about 1900. Two other species are vagrants to New Zealand, and a Corncrake Crex crex was reputedly killed near Nelson in 1865, but this record has not been officially accepted. The rails are mainly aquatic birds, all capable of swimming well. In New Zealand, they range in size from the small Marsh Crake to the large flightless Takahe. Apart from the Pukeko and Weka, rails and crakes are

other endemic species became extinct

between the arrival of Maori, and European

secretive birds, usually skulking in freshwater swamps, and estuarine mangroves and reedbeds. On some mammal-free islands, however, they live on the forest floor. Rails have slim bodies that help them move through dense vegetation, moderately long powerful legs with long unwebbed toes that help them walk in wetlands, a short tail, which is flicked up and down as they walk or swim, and short broad wings. Apart from the flightless Weka and Takahe, rails have low, laboured flight by day, but at night they fly 165. AUSTRALIAN COOT Other name: Eurasian Coot Size: 38 cm; males 570 g, females 520 g Geographical variation: Four subspecies; the form australis breeds throughout Australasia, including New Zealand. **Distribution:** Ranges from Europe and parts

New Zealand, the Takahe and the Pukeko, are believed to represent two invasions from Australia of the cosmopolitan Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio*; the Takahe arrived

The two species of gallinule breeding in

several million years ago, and the Pukeko much more recently. Typical of ancient New Zealand birds, the Takahe has become larger and flightless.

The gallinules and coots have a bony frontal shield extending from the bill to cover the forehead. The legs of coots are quite short, and the toes have lobes of skin that help them swim.

Most species nest solitarily, but Pukeko

form groups and several females can lay in

the same nest. The cup-shaped nest is

generally well concealed in dense swamp vegetation or among Carex clumps; however,

coots construct an exposed floating platform attached to raupo or rushes. The downy young are capable of walking, running and swimming within days of hatching.

Ow, Reading: Ripley, S.D. 1977. Rails of the World. Toronto: M.F. Feheley.

Fulica atra

Plate 37

and often two broods are raised. The nest is an untidy, floating platform of twigs, rushes

and waterweed anchored in emergent vege-

tation on the margins of inland waters. Rushes are often bent over to form the nest itself or

Distribution: Ranges from Europe and parts a cover above it. Both sexes collect material. They lay 4–8 creamy white eggs (50 x 34 mm), to New Guinea, Australia and New Zealand.

Coots were recorded in New Zealand as vagrants on eight occasions between 1875 and 1953, all in the South Island. One was recorded at Lake Tutira, Hawke's Bay, in 1954, but then Coots invaded from Australia in 1957, when nine were shot in Southland, one was shot

rarapa and another was seen on Lake Pupuke, Auckland. The first breeding record in the South Island was at Lake Hayes, near Arrowtown, in 1958, and in the North Island at Lake Okareka, near Rotorua, in 1962. Coots spread to all districts in the 1960s and 1970s

near Blenheim, one was shot on Lake Wai-

and are now widespread and common on certain lakes.

Coots favour shallow, sheltered bays fringed with extensive raupo beds and willows, especially in Auckland, on Hamilton Lake, on the Volcanic Plateau lakes, on Lake

Tutira, Virginia Lake (Wanganui), Centennial Lagoon (Palmerston North), Lake Elterwater (Marlborough), St Annes Lagoon (near Cheviot), Lake Heron and the Ashburton

lakes (Canterbury). They are still largely

absent from Wellington, Nelson, the West Coast and Southland.

Population: c. 2000 birds in 1995.

Conservation: Protected self-introduced

Breeding: Eggs are laid in August–February,

native. Coots are now widespread and firmly established in New Zealand, and slowly

increasing as they colonise new lakes.

They lay 4–8 creamy white eggs (50 x 34 mm), uniformly marked with dark spots. Both sexes incubate for 22–26 days and care for the young. The age of first breeding of the smaller Eurasian Coot is at 1–2 years old, and the oldest known banded bird in Europe lived over 18 years.

Behaviour: Coots form large flocks in the non-breeding season, but in spring and summer, while territorial breeding birds are occupied in or near reedbeds, non-breeders form small flocks in more open water. Although highly

Behaviour: Coots form large flocks in the non-breeding season, but in spring and summer, while territorial breeding birds are occupied in or near reedbeds, non-breeders form small flocks in more open water. Although highly mobile, they are presumed to move at night, because they are not seen to fly by day; rather, they skitter across the surface, rather like New Zealand Dabchicks, feet trailing and with rapid, shallow wingbeats, to splash down breast first. Their usual call is a series of loud, harsh notes uttered singly, sometimes rendered 'krark'.

dered 'krark'.

Feeding: Diet is mainly vegetarian but includes some aquatic invertebrates. They reach most of the plants in submerged weedbeds by diving; they jump upwards and forwards, disappearing bill first. Their lobed feet alone propel them under water. They bring plants to the surface, jerkily swallowing what is in the bill. Dives last 2–15 seconds, depending on the water depth. They sometimes graze grass of mown lawns at some city lakes.

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