

Anti-predatory Behaviour of the Coot

During early July 1992 I observed a Swamp Harrier *Circus approximans* attacking a Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* in the open water of Lake Borrie at the Werribee Treatment Complex, Victoria. The Coot had been struck several times and the Harrier had even gripped the Coot's head with its talons and wrenched the head and neck upwards, but had failed to lift its prey. The Harrier flew out of view between assaults. As the Harrier approached again, the Coot extended its head and neck towards its attacker, rolled onto its back and kicked at the Harrier with both legs, giving the appearance of running in mid air. The Harrier hovered nearby then retreated, apparently perturbed by the Coot's behaviour. The Coot remained on its back for about two minutes, with its legs still pointing upwards but motionless. Finally it rolled onto its belly and began swimming away when it was again approached by the Harrier. The Coot repeated the kicking manoeuvre and the Harrier flew away. Shortly thereafter the Coot rolled back over and swam to safety. Both the nominate subspecies *F.a. atra* and the Australian subspecies *F.a. australis* use their feet when fighting conspecifics (Macdonald 1968, Cramp & Simmons 1980) but such behaviour does not appear to have been recorded previously in the context of interspecific aggression. Other large rails also use their feet in interspecific fights and defence, e.g. Tasmanian Native-hen *Gallinula mortierii* and Purple Swamphen *Porphyrio porphyrio* (Ridpath 1972, Mooney 1981, N. Mooney pers. comm.). Another mainly aquatic rail, the Dusky Moorhen *Gallinula tenebrosa*, has not been observed using its feet to repel predators (Garnett 1978).

References

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