

Hybridisation between Black-tailed Native-hen and Eurasian Coot

In late 1988 a female Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra* was observed feeding a small, black chick in Melbourne Zoo's Great Flight Aviary. As the Coot was the only representative of its species within the exhibit, it was first thought that it had adopted a young Black-tailed Native-hen *Gallinula ventralis*, a species which had frequently bred in the aviary.

The young bird was watched with interest over the following weeks and we began to doubt our initial assumption as to its identity. The chick was much more at home in water than is usual for a Native-hen, and its toes appeared excessively long, making it rather ungainly on land. The Coot continued to care for it but it was also fed by a male Black-tailed Native-hen and it became increasingly apparent that the chick was the hybrid young of these two birds.

In mid January 1989 the Coot was discovered brooding a clutch of four eggs in a nest on a sedge tussock. They were typical Coot eggs, pale buff in colour and heavily speckled, unlike the speckled green eggs of a Native-hen. They were removed for artificial incubation and two subsequently hatched, the others proving infertile. These two chicks were also hybrids. About this time the original chick, now well grown, was removed from the Great Flight Aviary. It was housed in an off-limit enclosure where, in due course, it was joined by its younger siblings.

The neonate chicks had a covering of dense black down with an indistinct whitish cravat on the upper throat, a white-tipped, pale pink bill with a thin transverse dark line separating the white tip from the remainder of the bill and crossing upper and lower mandibles. The reddish head colouration typical of young coots was absent. As the chicks grew, the black natal down was replaced with olive-brown plumage similar to that of young Native-hens, and as adults they resembled very dark Black-tailed Native-hens.



Black-tailed Native-hen (left) and hybrid Black-tailed Native-hen X Eurasian Coot (right)

The Black-tailed Native-hen is described by Schodde & Tidemann (1986) as follows: upperparts dark greenish-brown with green tinge, nearly black on the head. Large black tail often held cocked, underparts dark grey with slight blue tinge, a few white flecks on flanks. Eye bright golden-yellow. Bill: upper mandible bright pea-green, lower red. Legs red with long toes.

The Eurasian Coot is slate-black with white frontal shield and bill. Varying minor amounts of white may be present on wings and under tail-coverts. Eye red; legs and lobed toes grey (Schodde & Tidemann 1986).

The hybrid birds had dark olive-brown upperparts, glossy black head and neck, grey-black underparts and grey-tinged, flesh-coloured legs and feet with slight lobing on the toes. Upper mandible and frontal shield were bright yellow suffused with green and the lower manible orange. Eyes red-brown. Tails were black, shorter than that of a Native-hen, often held erect and flicked in a Native-henlike manner. A few small, barely discernible white flank spots were present.

Hybridisation in captive birds occurs frequently. Rutgers & Norris (1977) recorded numerous interspecific and intergeneric crosses but did not mention coot/gallinule hybrids. As might be expected, the majority of crosses involve the families most frequently kept in captivity, such as the Anatidae, Phasianidae, Psittacidae and Estrildidae. However, hybrids between *Gallinula* and *Fulica* have been recorded (Gray 1958), including one case of apparent hybridisation in the wild between American Coot *F. americana* and Common Moorhen *G. chloropus* (McIlkenny 1937). In addition records exist for presumed hybridisation between Eurasian Coot and Common Moorhen in the wild (Ackerman 1898, Suchetet 1897). Such hybridisation is therefore not solely the result of artificial circumstances.

Black-tailed Native-hen hybrids appear not to have been recorded previously, but observers should be alert to the possibility of such intergeneric hybrids occurring in the wild in Australia.

Thanks are due to Bird Department staff at Melbourne Zoo, in particular Peter Courtney, Sue Fratzac and Merv Jenkins for their help in caring for and recording details of the hybrid birds.

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Received 29 May 1990

