

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher,

Jim Butler

Contributing Coot

THE Eurasian Coot, with its black plumage, red eye and contrasting pure white bill and frontal shield, is a waterbird found throughout Australia. They can be found in huge rafts (1000 birds) on large wetlands and lakes, or in ones or twos on small ponds.



They are herbivores and forage on submerged aquatic vegetation and floating waterweed. They are good divers but are reluctant fliers and take

off by running across the water surface with much splashing. Their toes have diagnostic flattened lobes attached. These lobes serve the same purpose as duck webbing, they achieve increased underwater thrusting. Material foraged underwater is brought to the surface and sorted before being eaten. Coots eat and sleep on the water by day and by night.

Many birds make a profound contribution to human wellbeing by providing ecosystem services. For example, a Dutch study showed that bird-predation on apple-damaging insects increased the apple harvest by 66%. Darwin (1859) noted that many water plants do not possess fleshy fruits which would facilitate dispersal by frugivores. This observation led him to be the first to draw scientific attention to the role of waterbirds in plant dispersal. Coots act as dispersive vectors of plants both by internal transport of seeds within their guts and by external transport on feathers and their beaks and shields.

Coots have been found to disperse viable *Typha* seeds (Bulrush) in their faeces; and other seeds have been found on their feathers and their shields. Dispersal is crucial for the regional survival of water plants often confined to discrete habitats—lakes, ponds, dams, wetlands—which are spatially isolated. Coots are highly mobile in very large numbers over large distances which makes them important vectors of passive dispersal of numerous plant species. Their importance as vectors is even greater today as plants need to move to adapt to climate change. Coots contribute by providing a means for plant species to track the changes in ecosystems.

Salute a coot!

~ Jim

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Image: Eurasian Coot by
Ed Frazer at Brookfield