

# FULICA ATRA.

## Coot.

*Fulica atra* Linnæi et auctorum.

- *aterrima*, Gmelin, Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 703.
- *æthiops et leucoryx*, Sparrman, Mus. Carls., fas. i. pls. 12 and 13.
- *atrata et pullata*, Pallas.
- *platyuros*, Brehm.

WERE every one disposed to protect the Coot, there would not be a river, mere, or large pond in the British Islands without the presence of this ornamental and peaceful bird; for it takes advantage of any friendly protection afforded to it, by resorting to such situations for the purpose of breeding, during the months of spring and summer; in winter, when the inland ponds and water-courses become ice-bound, the Coot gradually migrates southward, where the waters are still open, some to our large rivers, while others find an asylum in estuaries and the flat oozy shores of the sea-coast. I may particularize Southampton Water, the bays of the South Coast, and the Harbour of Poole. In such localities, especially if the weather be severe, the Coot assembles in vast multitudes, for they there find a plentiful supply of food; but, I regret to say, thousands annually fall to the gunners, who steal upon the congregated masses in flat-bottomed punts, or await their passage from the sea to the open saline marshes of the interior. It is said that their flesh is good, and that they are really eaten; but of this I cannot bear personal testimony, since I have always regarded them in an opposite light; and it will be from sheer necessity if ever I shoot Coots for the purpose of eating. Independently of the British Islands, the Coot enjoys a wide range over the Old World; for it is found throughout the continent of Europe, from north to south, and in the latter direction proceeds considerably into Africa; eastward it is found as far as China and Japan, and in all the intervening countries of Asia Minor, India, and Siam. I believe it also occurs in Java and Sumatra, but of this I am not certain. In Australia it is represented by the *Fulica australis*, in South Africa by the *F. cristata*, and in North America by the *F. americana*; thus each portion of the globe has its own particular species of this very singular form. The Coot is so excellent a swimmer that the surface of the water may be said to be its natural abode; for I believe it never dives, unless to elude an enemy or to obtain some particular article of diet: on land its gait is as ungraceful as that of a Swan under similar circumstances. Its natural food consists of the leaves of water-grasses and other aquatic plants, insects, mollusca, and doubtless the fry of fish are not rejected; in a state of semi-captivity, it readily eats any cereals that may be given to it. Its flight is heavy and of short duration; its neck is then stretched forward to its greatest length in front, while its legs are trailed to their fullest extent behind. From the dense and oily character of its plumage, its body and wings are always protected from wet; it swims easily through the water, and stealthily threads the herbage, half submerged, when danger is at hand. That the Coot has a powerful enemy in the Peregrine is evidenced by the account I have given in my description of that species, where it will be seen that that Falcon not only takes it for food, but destroys it for mere sport.

The sexes are precisely alike in colour, but the female is never so large nor so heavy as the male; both have the conspicuous plate on the forehead, which becomes raised and much dilated just prior to the breeding-season, and rapidly diminishes after the duty of reproduction has been completed; this almost horny plate, whence has originated the trivial name of Bald Coot, is either of a pure milky white or slightly suffused with rose-colour. That the Coot may be easily domesticated we have abundant proof, several examples having lived on the ponds in the Gardens of the Zoological Society, and become as tame and familiar as any of the other birds in the aviaries. I must mention, however, that, like the Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*), it shows a great antipathy to newly-hatched ducklings and other birds, and sometimes kills them with a single stroke of its powerful bill. It occasionally utters a loud harsh note or *crew*, as stated by Meyer; this note is usually monosyllabic, but is sometimes rapidly repeated. I believe that the wings of this bird, like those of the Moorhen, are brought into action more often by night than by day; it is then that its partial migrations from one part of the country to another are performed; and those who are resident in the country must have often heard its peculiar call while passing, in the night-time, from one part of a river to another. The weight of the male during the breeding-season is a trifle less than 2 lbs., while the average weight of the female is 1 lb. 8 ozs.

I shall now give some account of a portion of the economy of this bird which I consider to be the most interesting part of its history, namely, its nidification; and then a description of the young, from the commencement of its existence to maturity, which has never yet been done so minutely by the ornithologists of this country as, in my opinion, the subject demands. During the month of April, any pond, lake, or river,