

# Cannibalism and scavenging by wintering Coot *Fulica atra*

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COOT *Fulica atra* is an abundant passage migrant and winter visitor throughout Israel (Shirihai 1996), which also breeds in small numbers, chiefly in the centre and north of the country. The species is omnivorous, although plant materials predominate. It usually feeds by scraping algae off submerged objects, picking food from the water surface, while swimming, or up-ending (occasionally diving) in

shallow water up to 40 cm deep, but also ingests seeds, grasses and cereals, and takes young emergent plant shoots on land. Animal food includes invertebrates, fish, amphibians, small birds and mammals (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996, Snow & Perrins 1998). Coots are also known to kleptoparasitise conspecifics and other waterfowl.

In March 1999, the International Birding and Research Center in Eilat (IBRCE) created a new freshwater lake, in the 'Bird Sanctuary', which attracted a wide range of bird species, including Coot. During December 1999 and January 2000, the foraging behaviour of Coots in this area was observed. Flock size was 12–41 and the birds spent most time feeding in alfalfa *Medicago sativa*, or foraging on fresh leaves of Pink Sorrel *Rumex cyprinus* and Seablite *Suaeda monoica*. Several flock members were handicapped birds, with a broken leg, or had been collected during the winter in a state of complete starvation.

On four separate occasions carnivorous feeding was noted. Twice, conspecifics with a broken leg were consumed while feeding in alfalfa. During January 2000, the species was also observed consuming what I assumed to be a recently dead Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*. However, on 15 January I observed them actively kill and consume an incapacitated, apparently very weak, Corncrake *Crex crex*.

These observations are interesting because all prey items were *Rallidae* and of a much larger body mass than previously reported. Although known to take carrion (del Hoyo *et al.* 1996), I know of no reports of Coot feeding on live prey. Given that the species may kill its own and neighbouring pairs' young during the breeding season (Taylor & van Perlo 1998), I consider it probable that stronger members of the wintering flock cannibalised weaker individuals and others during periods of food shortage.

#### REFERENCES

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