

The Coot

A favourite bird of mine's the coot,
who has an unusual attribute:
lobed toes on his peculiar feet.
(So why do we call them coots – not ceet?)
But as I was saying, I love those coots
in spite of their enormous foots.
Those broad-webbed paddles on his toes
sure speed his swimming as he goes,
yet still enable him to walk
on growing grass or floating stalk.

A coot has presence, a cut above
a raucous rook or cooing dove,
and stays aloof from jokes or jibes
about those dim web-footed tribes.
His saddest feature is his forehead,
all smooth and white, which must be horrid
because it means he's often called
not clever, cute or kind, but bald.

Coots build their nests among the reeds
from bits of rush and waterweeds;
and you may think it rather daft
to raise your family on a raft.
But wait a minute, have a look
next time you see them on the brook
or in the pond: those tiny balls
of coloured fluff with squeaky calls
are nature's gaudiest children. Hues
from orange-reds to powder-blues
adorn their downy heads. Alack!
The rest, like mum and dad, is black.

Coots aren't the kind of birds that sing.
Instead a loud explosive ping
or echoing metallic pik
reveals their presence 'up the creek'
(Except that no coot, I must add, 'll
roam that creek without a paddle,
because he has those long-webbed toes
which serve so well where-e'er he goes.)

Another reason why they're thriving?
Their special natural skill at diving,
one moment floating on the top,
the next, with just a gentle plop,
he's gone, head-first. The water boils
where down below he twists and toils

to wrest his dietary needs
from luscious underwater weeds.
Then suddenly he's back to peck fast
at all those lovely greens for breakfast.

Oh when will humans get it straight
and see how birds can compensate
for all our phobias and fears?
It's taken billions of years,
as well as avian toil and tears,
by means of natural selection
to reach this climax of perfection;
a miracle of evolution,
a psychological solution.

Yes, watching coots is sheer delight,
establishing their natural right
to food and drink, a place to live
in fair exchange for what they give
in interest, pleasure, revelation
of every facet of creation.
Is this an experience we've missed
while ticking species on a list?
How often do we pass them by,
hell-bent on rarities? But why,
when there's so much for us to learn
down by "haunts of coot and hern"?
Yes, even Lord Tennyson once took
coots as a feature of 'The Brook'.

Why then I wonder, is the coot
still held in general disrepute?
We watch the family as they feed
amongst the verdant waterweed.
"Bald as a coot" still comes to mind,
a comment not deserved nor kind.
But that white shield performs a trick,
a signal to a hungry chick:
"Here are some reed-bed stems for lunch,
dredged from the depths for you to crunch".

Coots aren't colourful or rare.
Perhaps that's why we seem to share
the view that coots are thick, and never
would any birder call them clever.
But territorial? Oh boy,
just watch the tricks that they employ
to hold that strip of shoreline, where

each rootin', tootin', shootin' pair
will chase their foes across the water,
use language that they didn't ought'er.

They thrash their wings as battering flails,
or raise them arched like battle-sails
to threaten rivals in their strife
by looking twice as large as life.
And when this threat does not succeed,
in scaring off their foes, they need
to sit back on their tails and box
with feet and claws. Such violent shocks!
And this goes on for weeks and weeks,
shatters the peace with squeals and squeaks,
and many a tussle, chase and fight
with battles morning, noon and night.

A few weeks later, look at this:
a scene of quiet domestic bliss.
A mother with a brood of six
black balls of fluff, the cutest chicks.
Aggression pays; the strong survive,
and bald or hairy, stay alive.
Or do they? For unlike other rails
whose food in marshland never fails,
coots take their young far from the shore
where chicks are safe, but little more.
Protein's what they need to thrive,
though fluffy nestlings cannot dive.
It's shoreline shrimps and snails they need
but adults still must dive for weed.
For coots are vegetarian feeders,
but – here's the rub – prolific breeders.

So late-hatched weaker chicks, in fact
may be neglected or attacked.
For their own parents, short of food,
may decimate their hungry brood.
So what does the researcher see?
It's murder in the nursery!
This is infanticide, no clowning;
they kill their surplus chicks by drowning!

Coots, caught in a double bind,
have to be cruel to be kind.
She laid six eggs, a splendid batch,
but hard when all six nestlings hatch.
How complicated life can be!

Survival first, though food is free.

What marvels of the avian mind
the ornithologist can find!
Complex and strange the coot, but not
by any means an avian clot.
Try watching him. You'll learn a lot.
But please, if you're inclined to hoot,
and call him 'baldy-nut' to boot,
don't underestimate the coot