

# A Coot *Fulica atra* eating waterfowl droppings

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*In February 1996 a Coot Fulica atra was observed on Vrbje pond (Lower Savinja Valley, Slovenia) feeding on waterfowl droppings, probably of Mute Swans Cygnus olor or geese Anser sp. This unusual feeding behaviour may have occurred because of the hard winter and the difficulty in finding food that the birds may have experienced in that year and in that area.*

Key words: Coot, *Fulica atra*, waterfowl droppings, feeding, Slovenia.

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Vrbje pond is situated in the Lower Savinja valley near the Savinja River in Central Slovenia. The 13.5 ha pond supports emergent (e.g. *Typha latifolia*, *T. angustifolia*) and floating vegetation (*Potamogeton crispus*, *P. notans*, *P. spicatum*, *Myriophyllum spicatum*, *Elodea canadensis*). Detailed descriptions of the study areas are given elsewhere (Vogrin 1996, Vogrin & Vogrin 1997). Vrbje pond has been one of the focal areas of the Slovenian wintering population of Coots *Fulica atra* in recent years. In winter, it supports an average of up to 34.6 Coots/ha feeding on algae and floating vegetation (Vogrin 1996, 1997).

On 3rd February 1996, a Coot was observed feeding on waterbird droppings, whilst walking on the ice and picking up seeds, probably of *Potamogeton* sp. After

feeding on the seeds the Coot moved towards the dropping, probably of a Mute Swan *Cygnus olor* or a goose *Anser* sp. and started to pick it up. When the Coot finished with this dropping it moved towards another one and started to feed on it. From a distance of about 30 m, I observed the birds through 7x50 binoculars. During this time I observed two other Coots that were also eating waterfowl droppings. On Vrbje pond I have observed waterbirds for the past five years but this was the first time that I recorded such behaviour.

The day on which the observations were made was a cold day with an average daytime temperature of -5°C. About 90% of the water surface was completely frozen. On this day about 600 aquatic birds were foraging on the pond, on an available sur-

face area of c. 1.4 ha, which means more than 400 birds/ha.

Coots are omnivorous, feeding mainly on submerged macrophytes, but also on invertebrates and molluscs (Cramp & Simmons 1980, Delić 1991, Glutz von Blotzheim et al. 1973). The only previous report that I found of a Coot feeding on droppings was that of Phillips (1991). It seems likely that this phenomenon most probably occurs only during hard winters and possibly also when access to food is difficult. We must also take into account the nutritional content of faeces which could have similar digestibility and nitrogen content to those of grass (see Summers & Grieve 1982). ♦

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#### RESUM

##### **Fotja *Fulica atra* menjant excrements d'aus aquàtiques**

El febrer de 1996 una Fotja *Fulica atra* fou observada a l'embassament de Vrbje (vall de la Baixa Savinja, Eslovènia) menjant excrements d'aus aquàtiques, probablement de Cigne Mut *Cygnus olor* o oques *Anser* sp. Aquest comportament alimentari inusual podria estar relacionat amb la duresa de l'hivern i la dificultat de trobar menjar que els ocells haurien tingut durant aquest any en aquesta zona.

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