

## Coexisting with Coots

A small duck-like bird, the American Coot's black body, red eyes, and white beak makes it one of the more easily identified waterfowl. A flock of coots is sometimes called a "commotion" or a "swarm." Property managers in the south will recognize the sentiment behind these names as they can be an unwelcome nuisance during the cooler months. Swarms can swell to 1,500 birds resulting in damaged turfgrass from aggressive feeding, digging, and defecation.

### Natural History

Native to North and Central America, the American Coot has also been found in parts of Europe. Coots prefer shallow fresh-water ponds and marshes, making them common visitors to urban ponds, but can also be found in coastal waters. Osprey and bald eagle sometimes prey upon adults. A number of animals including raccoons, skunks, foxes, coyotes, and snapping turtles will prey on coot eggs and nestlings.



*Coots are small, duck-like birds that can be an unwelcome nuisance to turfgrass managers.*

Coots are opportunistic feeders and will eat aquatic vegetation and algae, fish, tadpoles, crustaceans, snails, worms, insects, and eggs of other marsh birds. They will also steal food from other waterfowl, especially diving ducks as they return to the surface with aquatic plants from the bottom of the pond. They also feed on agricultural crops and turfgrass.

Because of their adaptability, large numbers, and disregard of most attempts to shift them, there is still much debate over how to best control coot damage. There is one golf course in California, however, that has learned to coexist with the coots for a number of years.



*A flock of coots is known as a "swarm". Swarms can sometimes swell to 1,500 birds. Photo taken at Bonita Bay by Maryle Barbé.*

### Metropolitan Golf Link, Oakland, CA

Coots use Metropolitan Golf Links as a rest area during their annual migration, with a couple hundred birds stopping each year. Resting in the lakes at night, they spend the day eating grass, digging, and defecating. The 17th green would get so bad that golf course staff would need to clean the green two to three times a day. The coots would also dig holes that needed to be sanded and reseeded daily. Kendra, a goose dog, was very successful in controlling the goose population, but the coots just ran into the water instead of flying away. Something else needed to be done.

## Setting Goals

The first order of business was to set appropriate goals. Recognizing that eliminating coots from the course altogether was not realistic, they decided on the following goals:

- Reduce damage from coots on green
- Reduce cost of maintenance on #17 green
- Improve the enjoyment of golfers while playing golf
- Allow coots to continue their natural migration process

## Implementing Efforts

It was first recommended that they obtain a depredation permit due to the tremendous coot damage. Since CourseCo, the managing company is a very environmentally conscious company, and the superintendent, Gary Ingram, CGCS, believed there must be a less drastic solution, he decided to try installing a fence around the green. He chose a silt fence as it was readily available, somewhat inexpensive, easy to install, and, the correct height and best color for the situation.

Three rolls of silt fence are installed outside of water hazards sloping towards the green so if a ball hit the fence there is a chance it would continue towards the green. Fencing is installed to coincide with the beginning of the migration season before the coots become used to visiting the green as not only a place to eat and congregate, but as a natural route to other areas on the course.

Fence stakes must be replaced when wind, rain, and golfers loosen or pull them out. Fencing also must be replaced once during the season due to rain, wind, and solar radiation deterioration. Ingram has learned that if repairs and replacement are not done consistently enough, the coots will go back to visiting the green.

## Communicating Efforts to Guests

Communication and education of the guests is critical to the success of this project. Putting a fence in the way of the golf shots definitely made the hole more difficult and at times required golfers to understand how this fence should be played as per the rules of golf. Golf shop staff is well informed with information on both the counter and breezeway tables. Information was also available on the Metropolitan Golf Links web page through the Superintendents blog.

## Cost & Results

Over the year, fencing costs around \$250 and about \$600 in labor is spent maintaining the fence. This compares to approximately \$4,000 per year cleaning and repairing the coot damaged green. Ingram considers “the cost savings to be incidental to the good will and efforts in doing what was right.”

The fencing is adequate in meeting the goals. Coots continue to eat in the roughs and fairways, but the damage is incidental compared the destruction to the green. The owners and guests are happy. Ingram’s only regret is that he wishes he had tried it sooner.



*At the Metropolitan Golf Links in Oakland, CA, fencing protects #17 Green from a swarm of coots by restricting them to the other side of the lake.*