

DO MAINLAND COOTS OCCUR IN HAWAII?

by H. Douglas Pratt

Traditionally, all coots seen in Hawaii have been referred to the endangered endemic subspecies *Fulica americana alai* known as the Hawaiian Coot. Apparently no valid records exist for the mainland form *F. a. americana* in the islands. Nevertheless, some authors (Munro 1943, 'Elepaio, 3:37; Udvardy 1960, 'Elepaio, 21:20-22) have suggested that mainland American Coots may visit Hawaii. Coots are highly migratory, and several other continental waterfowl regularly winter in the islands in numbers, so such occurrences would not be surprising.

Mainland coots (Fig. 1A) can be distinguished in the field by the configuration of the frontal shield. In the Hawaiian Coot the shield is larger and more bulbous (Fig. 1B) than in its mainland counterpart. It extends up the front of the head to a

point between and over the eyes. Usually, the bill and shield of these birds are pure white. A few individuals of the Hawaiian Coot, however, show a dark ring near the tip of the bill and a dark red frontal shield sharply set off from the white bill (Fig. 1C). This rare morph resembles the mainland subspecies in color pattern, but the size and shape of the shield is that of the Hawaiian race. In mainland birds, particularly in winter, the frontal shield is only a small knob and terminates on the forehead *in front of the eyes*. The differences are most obvious when the birds are seen together.

Variation in the frontal shield of the Hawaiian Coot, as well as the occurrence of mainland birds in Hawaii are being investigated by biologists throughout the islands. Birders who have information relative to this research and who wish to assist in this effort should contact Dr. Robert J. Shallenberger, P.O. Box 1166, Kailua, HI 96734.

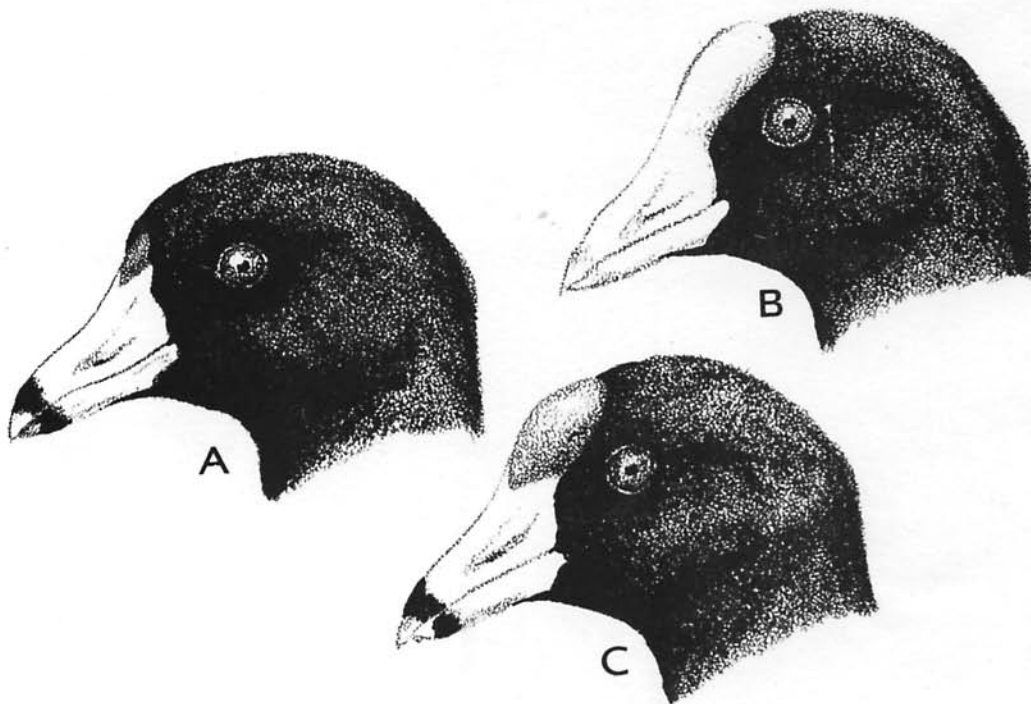


Fig. 1. Illustrations of a mainland American Coot (Fig. 1A), a typical Hawaiian Coot (Fig. 1B), and the red-shielded morph of the Hawaiian Coot (Fig. 1C).

Illustrations by H. Douglas Pratt