

USGA

Cantankerous Coots

By: Pat Gross, Southwest Director, USGA Green Section

This time of year, any golf course with a lake or pond is suffering through the mess and damage caused by our feathered friend — the coot. The Kanny brothers at River Ridge Golf Club compiled some excellent information on coot control that was published in *California Fairways* magazine (July/August 1993, pp. 6-8) that might be helpful this time of year. The following article summarizes some of this information along with an update on other methods being tried in the Southwest.

Coots, or mudhens (*Fulica americana*) are migratory birds that come to the Southwest in the fall when the first cold front hits Canada. The birds normally arrive in September, with the highest populations normally evident from October through January. Any coots left over by April are here to stay. They damage trees and greens and other closely cut turf areas with their voracious feeding habits, nibbling the plant down to the root. The copious amount of excrement left behind by the coots is messy, disrupts the playability of greens, and tends to burn the more sensitive grasses such as *Poa annua* and creeping bentgrass. Coots are covered by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (16 U.S.C. 703-711) which allows the control of migratory birds, but only with a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Coots are not covered by the Endangered Species Act of 1973 (16U.S.C. 1539). The National Audubon Society concedes that coots can be a pest, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has encouraged depreda-

tion using authorized methods.

Where does that put us today? Coots are damaging our golf courses, but it is not politically correct to control them. What are your options? The following is a list of control measures to minimize coot damage on your course:

- Shooting is the principle method of control, but is unpopular in urban settings due to noise, safety concerns, and public sentiment. Permits are normally required, and you should also contact the police or sheriff in your area before shooting.
- Trapping with nets has been tried, but is somewhat unsuccessful.
- Anesthetic bait has been used successfully to tranquilize the birds and remove them from the site for euthanization. This is a quiet operation and far less controversial than shooting the coots. Licensed pest control operators are available to perform this operation for you.
- Harassment, using trained dogs, is somewhat successful for coots but better for Canada geese. Shoreline Golf Links in Mountain View, California, purchased a trained border collie to chase the coots, and they are very satisfied with the results.
- Monofilament fishing line or barrier netting has been used around the edges of ponds with some success. The barrier is held by rebar stakes that are placed around the perimeter of the pond and angled back toward the water.
- Noisemakers, such as scare shells or cannon, are not recommended for golf courses. The random noise is distracting

to golfers and homeowners.

- In some instances, providing alternative food or habitat is effective. Jeff Stroup at Industry Hills Golf Courses has been able to keep coots away from the greens by piling grass clippings near the ponds (but away from play) for them to eat. It has also been suggested that providing a tall vegetative buffer at the edge of the lake helps keep the coots in the water and off the grass.

According to all the people I talked with, there are no totally effective methods to eliminate coots once and for all. The anesthetic baits are working the best at this time, but you should probably hire a licensed pest control operator in your area for this job to avoid hurting nontarget species. According to the Kanny's, it is necessary to use several methods to create a hostile environment for the coots including harassment, barrier fences or netting, and shooting. Unfortunately, I am not aware of any research regarding coot control. For the moment, all you can do is be persistent and keep them nervous.

USGA News Notes: Speaking of cantankerous coots . . . the Wester Region of the Green Section has been split, and Larry Gilhuly is now the Director of the Northwest Region. He will continue to cover the states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Wyoming, Hawaii and British Columbia. Pat Gross was recently named the Director of the Southwest Region. As they have done for the past three years, Pat and Mike Huck will continue to serve the states of California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah and Colorado. /

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