

Successful breeding of an Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*) with aberrant plumage

Úspešné hniezdenie aberantne sfarbenej lysky čiernej (Fulica atra)

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Abstract. A rare case of a specimen of Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*) with large part of plumage white successfully breeding was observed in the city of Gand, Belgium. The specimen was observed on its nest with a normally coloured chick.

Key words: anomalous plumage, breeding success, Eurasian Coot

Introduction

Colour aberrations in bird plumage are a well-known phenomenon (see van Grouw 2021). They are differentiated into many types depending on the chemical, physiological, genetic, and environmental processes that underlie of the phenotypic patterns (Dodaro et al. 2024). In particular, regarding aberrations with white plumage, van Grouw (2021) distinguished among leucism (congenital absence of melanin-producing cells), progressive greying (progressive loss of melanin-producing cells) and albino (total absence of melanin due to lack of the key enzyme). The breeding success of birds with aberrant plumage consisting in large part of white plumage is poorly known, but they are likely less successful than normally pigmented birds due to their showy coloration, although some cases of successful breeding are known, mostly in species of the genus *Turdus* (Møller et al. 2013; Colombo et al. 2018; Zitani et al. 2019; Hernandez et al. 2020; Kočí & Krištín 2024).

In this note an interesting case of successful breeding in a Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*) with aberrant plumage is described.

Observation

An adult specimen of Eurasian Coot with aberrant plumage was observed on 16 April 2026 in the city of Gand (Belgium), near the castle of Gravensteen (51.05679°N 3.72037°E). Most of its plumage was white, while the frontal shield, bill, eyes and legs were normally pigmented, showing their typical colouration (Fig. 1). It was observed for some minutes on and around its nest with a normally coloured chick (Fig. 2) and on one occasion I could see this specimen feeding its chick. The nest was built among reeds on the banks of the canal next to the castle. It was near the shoreline, but the reeds provided some protection from predators. The reeds with the nest were located near a low bridge from which the specimens could be easily observed. Both the adult and the chick were not disturbed by the people on the bridge. During the observa-



Fig. 1. The specimen of Eurasian Coot (*Fulica atra*) with aberrant plumage observed in Gand, Belgium (photo by F. Ceccolini).

Obr. 1. Aberantne sfarbený jedinec lysky čiernej (*Fulica atra*) pozorovaný v Gande, Belgicko (foto: F. Ceccolini)



Fig. 2. The same specimen on the nest with its chick (photo by F. Ceccolini).

Obr. 2. Ten istý jedinec na hniezde s mláďaťom (foto: F. Ceccolini).

tion none of them had interactions with other individuals of the species.

The Eurasian Coot regularly breeds in the city of Gand and I observed other nests with adults and chicks of the same age on the same day in other parts of the city. The timing of breeding was consistent with that of other breeding pairs at the locality. In the canal of the castle of Gravensteen no other pairs of Eurasian Coot were breeding, but a few meters away in the same reeds I observed a Great crested grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*) brooding on the nest (with no interactions recorded).

Since the observation was episodic, I cannot know how many eggs were initially laid by the specimen with anomalous plumage; anyway, although the observed breeding attempt was successful, the presence of only one chick suggests that hatching success was low as the mean clutch size of Eurasian Coot is about 7 eggs (Polak 2010).

Discussion

It is not possible to establish if the colour aberration observed was due to leucism or progressive greying, whilst a phenomenon of albinism can definitely be excluded, since some parts of the plumage were black and the eyes retained normal reddish-brown pigmentation. Anyway,

the observation was interesting, since few records of Eurasian Coot with aberrant plumage are present in literature (Sage 1962; Volf 2000; van Grouw, 2006; van Grouw & Hume, 2016; Hariharan et al. 2016; Patel et al. 2022; Dodaro et al. 2024; Sharma et al 2026).

Even rarer are recorded episodes of reproductive success for specimens with aberrant plumage. Among the few investigated cases, most concern species of the genus *Turdus*. In fact, successful breeding has been demonstrated in a completely leucistic specimen of the South American thrush *Turdus rufiventris* (Colombo et al. 2018) and in a partially leucistic male of the American robin *Turdus migratorius* (Zittani et al. 2019). Moreover, several nesting attempts of a fully leucistic female of the Eurasian blackbird *Turdus merula* were registered, but none of them were successful (Kočí & Krištín 2024). As for the Eurasian Coot, the only case of reproductive success of a specimen with aberrant plumage I was able to find in literature is the one described by Volf (2000) in Dobruška (Czech Republic).

Successful breeding for specimens with large part of plumage white is quite challenging indeed, since this plumage is more easily visible to predators and could be an obstacle to social life or finding a mate. For example, in one study on Mute swan (*Cygnus olor*), Reese (1980) found that the mortality of leucistic juveniles was dou-

ble that observed in juveniles with normal plumage, whilst Corrêa et al. (2017) observed that a leucistic adult of Southern lapwing (*Vanellus chilensis*) was not accepted into a conspecific group. Moreover, since the time of Darwin (1871) the colouration of plumage has been associated with sexual selection, with females typically preferring brightly coloured males (see e.g. West-Eberhard 1983; Møller & Birkhead 1994; Safran et al. 2005), likely because plumage is often condition-dependent (Hamilton & Zuk 1982): anyway also in a non-dimorphic species as the Eurasian Coot, the colour of plumage can likely be important in courtship, as well as in other not or poorly dimorphic species (Truax & Siegel 1982; Parker et al. 2003; Galván & Møller 2009).

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Súhrn

Dňa 16.4.2026 bol pri meste Gand v Belgicku (51,05679°N 3,72037°E) pozorovaný aberantne sfarbený jedinec lysky čiernej (*Fulica atra*). Lysina, zobák, oči a nohy boli sfarbené ako u bežne vyfarbených jedincov, zvyšok operenia však bol biely (obr. 1). Daný jedinec bol pozorovaný na hniezde, kde s ním bolo aj jedno štandardne vyfarbené mláďa (obr. 2). Na danej lokalite lysky bežne hniezdia a v ten istý deň bolo pozorovaných viacero hniezd a jedincov s mláďatami podobného veku. Všetky boli sfarbené štandardne. Nakoľko ide o epizodické pozorovanie, nie je možné odhadnúť, aká bola veľkosť znášky opísaného jedinca, ale skutočnosť, že vodil iba jedno mláďa napovedá nízkej úspešnosti.

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