

Thieving Wigeons

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Poacher, thief, pirate, robber! These unflattering terms describe the American Wigeon. How did wigeon earn these names?

The second author (NM) first noticed American Wigeons stealing food from American Coots on the Leslie Street Spit, Toronto, in the fall of 1997. The coots would dive below the surface of the bay and return with a beak full of vegetation. The wigeons would immediately swim over and help themselves to some of the plant material and to any that surfaced beside the coots. The coots always had enough left to feed themselves. Maybe the coots had to dive twice as much to satisfy their needs, but there were no aggressive moves by either species. Again for three weeks in October 1998, the coots were accompanied by their usual group of wigeons on the Spit.

This feeding behaviour is well documented in the literature. Bent (1923) says: "the baldpate, being a poor diver and yet extravagantly fond of the succulent roots of the, so-called, wild celery, has to be content with what small bits of this delicacy the canvasback lets drop or what it can steal from this expert diver on its return to the surface." The American Wigeon, previously spelled Widgeon, was formerly known as the Baldpate.

Tozer and Richards (1974) remarked: "Widgeons will occasionally steal food from other waterfowl, earning the title of 'poacher'. For instance, on November 16, 1973, a flock of 50 Baldpates was observed taking vegetable matter from a feeding group of 150 American Coots."

American Wigeons are almost entirely vegetarian. They eat pondweeds, grasses, algae, sedges, wild celery, waterweed, water milfoils, duckweeds, smartweeds, arrow grasses, and water lilies (Bent 1923). They associate most frequently with waterfowl that enjoy a similar diet, the greatest overlap being between coots, wigeons and Gadwall (Eddleman, Patterson and Knopf 1985). Wigeons particularly like the roots and shoots of deep water plants which they are unable to acquire on their own. They wait until coots, Canvasbacks, Redheads or scaups return to the surface from a deep dive, bringing fresh food with them. Then, they literally grab the grasses away from diving ducks, sometimes right out of their bills! Often they gobble up dislodged grasses, stems, roots and seeds.

American Wigeons usually feed in shallow water along lake, river and pond shores. As waterfowl deplete the food in

shallow water, coots diving in deeper water make food available to non-diving wigeon (Eddleman et al. 1985).

American Wigeons benefit from robbing coots and diving ducks of food, but does robbing adversely affect their victims? Knapton and Knudsen (1978) studied wigeons robbing coots at Oak Hammock Marsh in Manitoba. They believe "Coots lose food for which they have expended energy, and therefore the process should be more properly termed piracy." Ryan (1981) noted that coots dived more often and generally left food for wigeons from their first dive, then while wigeons were preoccupied eating, they dived again for themselves. Coots that tried to evade by swimming away were generally not successful as wigeons caught up to them. Also, coots did not try to defend themselves or act aggressively. These findings are surprising since coots are very aggressive and defensive on the breeding grounds.

Why do coots and other waterfowl tolerate wigeons' thieving behaviour? The reasons may be two-fold. Coots consumed less energy by leaving food for wigeons than by evading or behaving aggressively (Ryan 1981). Also, having wigeons around may benefit the group because they respond quickly to the presence of hunters and other danger. Their piracy and distinctive whistling noise keeps all the ducks in a state of restless excitement (Bent 1923).

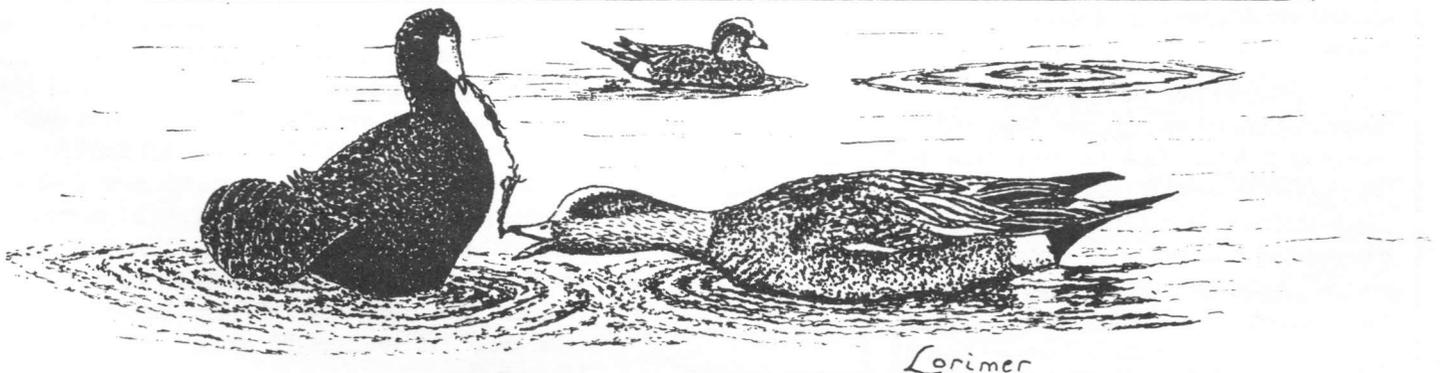
In summary, American Wigeons and Eurasian Wigeons too, steal food from coots and diving ducks because they are unable to dive to reach deeply growing plants. Coots and other waterfowl do not react aggressively or evade these actions since it is less energy consuming to tolerate thieving. In addition, they may benefit from the presence of wigeons, which are nervous and quick to respond to the presence of danger.

Acknowledgements

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American Wigeon stealing food from American Coot by Peter Lorimer