

Conservation Corner

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October 7, 2015

Several weeks ago the Kohnen family called wondering what to do about a recent visitor to their farmstead by Knoke. They had rescued their unexpected visitor from their bird dog, who didn't know what to think about this fine feathered friend who was acting rather unfriendly.

At first glance, it appeared to be a duck of some kind, but a closer look revealed a funny shaped beak, strange-looking feet, narrow wings, and legs placed far back on its body. Further research identified it as the Pied-billed Grebe, the most common grebe in North America.

Often described as part bird, part submarine, grebes are freshwater foot-propelled diving birds that feed on small fish, crustaceans, and aquatic insects. And while grebes are excellent divers, their feet are so far back on their bodies that they are poor walkers and easily fall over. They are also poor flyers. Of the seven species found in the Americas, two South American species are completely flightless. When alarmed, grebes slowly sink below the water and resurface out of sight among the reeds, giving them their common names helldivers or water-witches.

Grebes are known for their elaborate courtship displays and ceremonies which may include preening, head shaking, diving, weed carrying, and treading water rapidly with their body in a nearly vertical position. Both parents share in nest building, incubation, and care of their vividly striped young. While the newly hatched young are precocial and able to swim from birth, they often clamber up their parent's feet and spend most of their time sitting upon their swimming parent's backs. The adults may even swim underwater while carrying their young on their back!

Grebes are also known for swallowing feathers. When preening, adults eat their own feathers and also feed them to their young. Scientists believe these feathers form a plug in the pyloric pocket of their stomach which helps filter material passing to the intestine. Like owls, grebes regurgitate pellets containing bits of bone and shell.

As with many diving birds, the distinguishing features that identify each species of grebes are found on their heads. Other identifying features include their bills and feet. While the bill of each species varies in length and shape depending upon diet, all grebes have large webbed feet with broad lobes on their toes. Recent research has shown that these lobes work like the hydrofoil blades of a propeller – no wonder they can dive so well.

Grebes are ancient diving birds with no obvious close relatives, living or fossil. They were once classified in the same order as the loons, who are also foot-propelled diving birds, but recent molecular studies suggest that the grebes' closest living relatives are not loons but flamingos!

As we had experienced high winds the weekend before Kohnen's call, we surmised this visiting grebe was blown off course. They released their new friend at South Twin Lakes – we trust its story has a happy ending.



Photos by Rachel Kohnen