

Conservation Corner

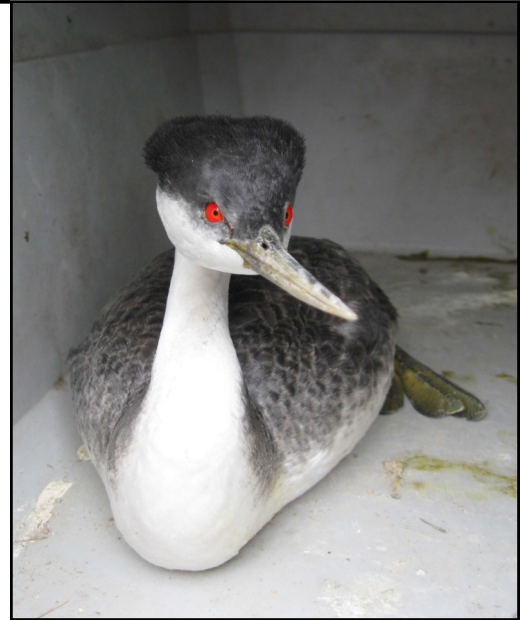
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Pocahontas County Naturalist



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First thing Monday morning last week, we received a call from Marv & Patti Allen. Over the weekend they had an unexpected guest drop in at their transport business parking lot along N-41 – literally drop in. They described the bird as loon-like, with lobed feet, long straight bill, and red eyes. And while he hadn't moved, he was alert, so I hopped in the van to go take a look.

I found the bird without much trouble, looking very lonely sitting on the crushed rock among the parked trucks and semis. I quickly placed him in the carrier and headed back to town where we identified him a Western Grebe. Next I called Kay Neumann, Executive Director at S.O.A.R. near Carroll, who has cared for many of our injured birds in the past. She related they had just released a loon, still had a swimming pool stocked with minnows, and so we made arrangements to meet in Lytton.



Have you ever seen a Western Grebe? Perhaps you know them by their common name dab chick or swan grebe. The one that landed west of Pocahontas was very striking in appearance, soft dark gray in color with a white throat and swanlike neck. Western Grebes are diving birds, spearing fish, mollusks, crabs, and salamanders with their long, thin bill. They breed on freshwater lakes and marshes across the American West and winter primarily off the Pacific Coast. NW Iowa borders the far eastern edge of their breeding range.

When I mentioned to Kay that the Allens thought maybe their guest had ridden in on a truck, she related that many times they try to land on wet pavement which they mistake for open water. Their legs are placed so far back on their body that walking is very difficult. All grebes spend most of their time in the water and are rarely seen on land or in flight.

Western Grebes are known for their dramatic courtship display known as “rushing.” The pair turns to one side, lunging forward as one, their bodies completely out of the water, and race across the water side by side with their necks curved forward. Western Grebes often nest in colonies, with hundreds or even thousands on one lake. After hatching, the young grebes leave the nest and hitch a ride on their parent's back.



Another striking feature of adult grebes is their red eyes. Eye color varies greatly in birds, much more so than in humans. Bird eyes may be black, brown, red, orange, yellow, blue, green, or white as well as many colors in between. Why red eyes? Scientists have determined that red oil drops in the eye's color receptors help improve distance vision, especially in hazy conditions. In the case of grebes and other diving birds, their red eyes help them locate shoals of fish.

Rescuing a stranded fellow traveler of Planet Earth—a fitting start to Earth Day Week!