



Photographer Gretchen Goodner used a moored boat as a blind while watching the nest.

Successful Adaptation

*by Sherry Rind
Redmond, Washington*

Last fall some twenty people considered themselves godparents to a clutch of pied-billed grebes hatching a few feet from their front yards. Though fairly common in the Puget Sound area in summer, pied-billed grebes are among the best hiders and the shyest of birds, nesting in concealed areas of

undisturbed marsh, lying so low in the water that from a distance their heads look like waves. Even the striking contrast of a black band on their whitish bills blends smoothly with the surrounding reeds and water. As more and more wetlands are being disturbed and built on, the birds must leave their cus-

tomary breeding grounds or adapt to new situations.

The pair in this story decided to adapt. The male grebe spent all spring whooping and crying in the highly populated Yarrow Bay area of Lake

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Approaching the nest, a grebe swims underwater, popping up when right next to the nest.



Both parents and young venture farther from the nest as the chicks grow up.

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Washington, not far from the shrinking marsh where grebes had nested for many years. Finally he attracted a mate in early August and they found a mini-marsh. In a small inlet flanked by a condominium building with a boat marina and some single-family homes only a few yards from the water, grew a patch of lily pads. A board was trapped in the patch and on this the grebes built their nest. Water depth was measured at about forty inches. For five days the grebes worked, bringing in pieces of vegetation which made a comfortable, partially submerged platform of rotting greenery.

The first three eggs came quickly. Then, as if the birds stopped to think about their family size, there was a week's wait before another egg arrived, followed by one more three days later. Five is a typical clutch size. The birds took turns sitting on the eggs. Though in full view of any watcher, the birds retained their stealth habits, such as diving when still at a distance from the nest, swimming under the weeds, and not popping up until right next to the nest.

By this time, word of the grebes was out among all the condominium dwellers and neighboring homeowners. The people did not exactly schedule sentry duty for themselves but it seemed as if at any given time of day and half the night, somebody was watching the birds. So it was that when a young man trying to dock his boat without power found it drifting toward the grebes, he soon had fifteen people yelling at him to "watch out, be careful, get that boat away from the birds!" Not knowing how else to cope, he jumped into the water and pushed his boat to the dock.

Throughout the incident, the birds were not alarmed. Grown used to boats coming and going, the grebes ignored them all. When a motor started, the birds might glance at the boat, then away. The birdwatchers' main worry was that the nest would break loose in a wind storm or a predator, such as a raccoon, would find it.

Nest and eggs stayed put and four babies hatched on the twenty-ninth day, September 10, with the fifth emerging September 13. The chicks were by no means as well camouflaged as their parents. Brightly striped as zebras in black and white, they also had disproportionately large red heads. Perhaps such markings help them hide in a reed bed but here they stood out clearly.

Just as both parent birds built the nest

For information about contacting any of these member clubs, please call that club's closest state coordinator. There is a state coordinator listing with phone numbers elsewhere in this publication.

and brooded the eggs, so did both tend and feed the babies. In fact, observers never did figure out which parent was which sex. Besides being monomorphic, the adults gave no behavior clues that watchers could be certain about, even though those watchers included a veterinarian who specialized in birds and the Curator of Birds from the Woodland Park Zoo.

Within hours of hatching, the chicks left the nest riding on a parent's back, whether out in the open or sheltering under the wings. When the parent dove in the grebe manner of instant submarine-like submersion, the babies went down, too. This differed from the hunting dive in which the grebe goes down head first.

For the first week parent and babies stayed close to the nest and gradually ventured farther out, still riding like cars on a ferry. When the youngsters began to swim on their own, the same procedure was repeated. They began by following their parent very closely but became more willing to venture farther away on their own. When swimming apart, the parents had a particular locator call, like angry Donald Ducks, so that the members of the family always kept track of each other.

The parents taught the youngsters to fish with another gradually progressive set of lessons. First the parent would bring a tiny fish to the nest. At sight of it, the chicks would chirp, dash over, and eat it. The parents were kept very busy bringing home enough fish for the eager eaters and the birdwatchers never tired of the sight. As the chicks got bigger, so did the fish. And the lessons became more difficult when the parent grebe, instead of bringing the fish right to the nest, dropped it in the water nearby so that the young ones had to chase it.

The young grebes did not catch food for themselves until they were almost fully fledged. By this time the lily pads had died back and Christmas was near. Soon after Christmas, the family was gone. With the lake devoid of both boats and birds, the view from the condos was mostly of whitecaps and grey waves. People looking out their windows automatically checked the place where the nest had been but there was only water.

Was the nest an accident, an aberration, or would the grebes make this their home and return in the spring? In March the question was answered when the grebes' peculiar booming wail was again heard, carrying clearly over the sound of power boats and human voices. ●



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