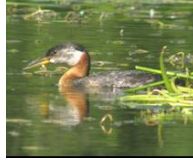


BIRD OF THE MONTH

Article & Photos by Jeannie Marcure

RED-NECKS IN THE FLATHEAD

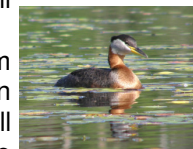
Webster defines a grebe as: “any of a family (*Podicipedidae*) of swimming and diving birds closely related to loons but having lobed toes.” In western Montana, six species of grebes are found during breeding season: Western, Clark’s, Eared, Horned, Pied-billed, and the topic of this month’s article, the Red-necked.



I became familiar with Red-necked Grebes a few years ago when I started exploring local waterways in my kayak. To avoid the noise and danger of speeding boats and jet skis, I began to gravitate toward smaller weedy lakes and ponds; in doing so, I unwittingly chose the favorite habitat of the Red-necked Grebe. I was first alerted to their presence by their hauntingly beautiful call which is somewhat like the loon. When I found the caller with my binoculars, I saw a large, long-necked water bird bigger than most ducks but smaller than a loon. As the name suggests, it had a distinctive rusty red neck topped by a whitish chin and cheek and a black cap. It also had a long yellowish bill and the body was black. In the summers since, I’ve had many memorable encounters with Red-necked Grebes and have learned fascinating things about them.

Like loons, grebes have physical adaptations that are closely tied to life on the water. Their legs are set far back on the body to help them swim underwater; therefore, they have a hard time walking and are seldom seen on land. Fish-eating grebes such as the Red-necked have long dagger-like bills and long flexible necks to help them catch prey. Their lobed toes, similar to those of a coot, are well-suited for propulsion and underwater steering. Although grebes typically feed near the water’s surface, dense bones and sleek bodies enable them to dive up to depths of 90 feet. A stubby tail cuts down on drag.

Red-necked Grebes arrive from their winter homes along the Pacific coast in early spring when the ice has left the small ponds and lakes that are their favorite homes. The monogamous pairs choose a territory of about 10 acres and vigorously defend this territory. After a courtship that may involve crest-raising, loud calls and a chest-to-chest head-wagging ritual, a floating nest is made of reeds, grass and cattails in water 2-3 feet deep. Sitting quietly in my kayak, I’ve had the privilege of watching an industrious pair of grebes carry reeds and cattails to the nest site and place them around a lily pad or other vegetation.



A successful nest of 2 to 7 off-white eggs typically hatch after 20-30 days of incubation by both parents. Over my years of observation, I’ve seen many nests destroyed by a sudden rise in water level caused by an unusually wet spring. When the chicks have all hatched, the nest is abandoned and the precocious young often ride on the parents’ backs, tucked under a wing. Although the chicks are able to swim and feed soon after hatching, this “free ride” helps them sustain body heat in cold spring weather and provides protection from predators such as bass, pike, gulls, coots and turtles. The downy chicks have bare spots on their crowns that are normally yellow but become vivid red when the chick is alarmed or begging for food. When the chicks are “hitchhiking,” the other parent dives for small fish and feeds them as they ride along. I’ve watched many a patient adult retrieve a small fish over and over before the chick can successfully swallow it. I’ve read that adults may dive and swim underwater with a chick on their back in times of danger but I haven’t been lucky enough to observe this behavior yet!

Besides their diet of fish, aquatic insects and vegetation, Red-necked Grebes ingest large numbers of their own feathers, taken mostly from the flanks and belly. The feathers are also regularly fed to the chicks. It is thought that this behavior protects the stomach and intestines from puncture by parts of their prey such as fish bones that are indigestible. Feathers also provide the binding material for the pellets that the grebes regurgitate.

At present, the conservation status of Red-necked Grebes seems to be stable. However, like other fish-eating birds, they are affected by pesticides that concentrate in the eggshells, causing breakage and nest failure. Also, the introduction of non-native fish such as pike into our lakes threatens the grebes, since the pike will eat the chicks and compete with the adults for food.

In the Flathead, Red-necked Grebes can regularly be seen (and heard) on many of our smaller lakes and ponds including Lake Blaine, Smith Lake and Blanchard Lake. If you boat or paddle on any of these lakes, watch carefully for nesting grebes and be careful not to disturb them. Sit quietly and observe their behavior and perhaps you’ll be lucky enough to catch a glimpse of a patient parent feeding a “hitchhiking” chick. The Flathead is a special place. Get out and enjoy all it has to offer!