

Pied-billed Grebes

By Sarah Belles

In small ponds, lakes and marshy areas, Pied-billed Grebes are a relatively common sight. A rather solitary species, Pied-billed Grebes are not usually seen in large flocks and are often observed alone or in small groups. These birds are fairly shy and frequently dive down in the water without a trace, eventually popping up in a completely different spot.

With their relatively drab coloration and often reserved behavior, they can be pretty easy to overlook. However, if you take a closer look at the behavior and life history of Pied-billed Grebes, you'll see that there is much more than meets the eye.

These small waterfowl may share some characteristics with ducks, but they are actually not related. If you take a look at the feet of grebes and compare them to those of ducks, you'll see that grebes have peculiar lobe-shaped toes, while ducks have webbed feet.

Pied-billed Grebes are mostly brown in color, with darker upperparts and lighter underparts. In the breeding season, the neck and crown feathers darken, and the throat turns black. The black band around the bill that gives the bird its name is only present during the breeding season, so it's best not to rely on its presence for identification. Juvenile Pied-billed Grebes have a striped pattern on their faces that eventually disappears when they reach maturity.

The call of a Pied-billed Grebe is fairly loud and variable, consisting of a series of gulping noises that sound like "kuk-kuk-kuk," along with some coos and whoops. Like other grebes, Pied-billed Grebes have interesting courtship displays that are a combination of pirouetting, head jerking, duetting and swimming.

Female and male grebes share the responsibilities of nest building and raising chicks. A typical nest is a floating mat made of dead aquatic plant material and is anchored to nearby vegetation to keep it from floating around. Although grebe chicks are usually ready to swim the day after they hatch, parents often carry the chicks on their backs for the first week or so and will even dive underwater with them tucked under their wings!

One of the most amazing things about these birds is that they can control their buoyancy by trapping water between their feathers. They can submerge and emerge from the water just like a submarine, which makes for a sneaky escape from predators. It also is a major part of their foraging technique, allowing them to easily catch small aquatic creatures.

Since Pied-billed Grebes eat a lot of fish and crustaceans, they also periodically consume soft contour feathers from their body. These form a strainer to hold fish bones and other harmful materials until they can be chemically digested or formed into pellets that are later regurgitated.

Pied-billed Grebes are capable of flight, but must take off from the water while running and flapping as if they are on a runway. Although Northern populations do migrate south for the winter, you will rarely

see a grebe in flight since they travel at night. Southern populations of Pied-billed Grebes are commonly residential, so you can find them year-round in most parts of Texas. If you haven't already, I hope you get the chance to see a Pied-billed Grebe sometime and have a newfound appreciation for this remarkable group of birds.

Caption: A Pied-billed Grebe swimming at Anahuac National Wildlife Refuge. Photo by Sarah Belles.