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*Birds of the Rocky Mountains*—Species Accounts,  
pages 55–63: Loons & Grebes

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# Species Accounts

## Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*)

**Identification:** In breeding plumage adults of both sexes can be readily identified by their pale gray head and neck color, except for a reddish brown foreneck and vertical striping down the nape and hindneck. The back lacks the strong white spotting typical of the other two loon species that occur in the area, and the birds are also slightly smaller in size. At close range, the bill appears slightly upturned, although the upper bill profile is almost perfectly straight. Wailing calls are typical on the breeding grounds, and sometimes also are uttered during spring migration.

**Status:** A vagrant throughout the area, varying from rare to accidental.

**Habitats and Ecology:** Like the other loons, found on larger rivers and lakes that support good fish populations.

**Seasonality:** The nearest known area of regular breeding is in northwestern Saskatchewan, although in the early 1970s breeding was suspected in the Caribou Mountains of Alberta. There was a reported case of nesting in Yellowstone National Park in 1929, when a pair of adults with young were reported on July 15 (Komsies, 1930). Oakleaf et al. (1982) consider this as a "historical record"; if valid it represents the only known nesting of the species south of the Canadian border.

**Comments:** Red-throated loons as well as arctic loons apparently make direct, perhaps normally non-stop, flights from their coastal wintering areas to their tundra breeding grounds, and thus are unlikely to be seen in this area. Like other loons, they evidently also often migrate at night, and so are rarely seen in the air.

**Suggested Reading:** Palmer, 1962; Peterson, 1976.

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## Arctic Loon (*Gavia arctica*)

**Identification:** In breeding plumage adults of both sexes can be readily identified by their silvery gray head and hindneck, with a black foreneck, and with large patches of white spots on the back surrounded by darker black on the flanks. Immatures or birds in fall plumage are very difficult to separate from other loons, and standard field guides should be consulted. Sometimes the slightly smaller size of the arctic loon helps separate it from the common loon, as does its more sharply defined separation of dark and white areas of the head and foreneck. Separation from the red-throated loon is aided by the more slender and seemingly slightly upturned bill of the latter; in the common and arctic loons the bill tapers gradually to a sharp point.

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**Status:** This is a vagrant species throughout the area, and must be considered as rare to accidental.

**Habitats and Ecology:** To be expected on large rivers and lakes supporting good fish populations.

**Seasonality:** The nearest known breeding areas are in extreme northeastern Alberta, near Leland Lake. Otherwise, the species might be observed during spring and fall migration, probably during the same general period as indicated for the other loons.

**Comments:** Like the other loons, arctic loons are non-gregarious and highly territorial during the breeding season. Their loud, wailing calls, which are associated with this high degree of territoriality, are thus most often heard on the breeding grounds, and the birds are relatively silent at other seasons.

**Suggested Readings:** Dunker, 1974; Peterson, 1976, 1979.



## Common Loon (*Gavia immer*)

**Identification:** This is the only regularly encountered loon of the area, and in breeding plumage adults of both sexes have uniformly blackish heads except for a large "necklace" of white striping on the sides of the neck near its base, and a much smaller area of similar white striping at the back of the throat. White speckling is evident over much of the back; the spots are smaller than those of the arctic loon and less well isolated from the area of black around them. This is the largest of the three loon species of the area, and for birds in non-breeding (winter or immature) plumage this size (at least 29 inches in length) provides a useful fieldmark. This species is also less strongly and sharply patterned on the head and neck in non-breeding plumage; instead there is a gradual gradation in color from black to white. Strong wailing to laughing calls are commonly heard on the breeding grounds.

**Habitats and Ecology:** Breeding typically occurs on clear and sometimes deep mountain lakes, where fish are abundant, human disturbance is at a minimum, and where small islands provide nest sites. In some areas muskrat houses or similar artificial islands may also be used.

**Seasonality:** Spring migration in Montana is from March 25 to May 26, with a peak in late April. Wyoming records show a spring peak in May. There is a Montana egg record for June 6, and a Jasper Park record for May 23. A newly hatched brood was observed in Grand Teton Park (Jackson Lake) on July 12, 1983. Fall migration in Montana is from September 7 to November 18; Wyoming records extend to November 28.

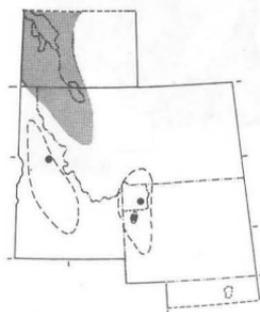
**Suggested Reading:** Olson and Marshall, 1952; Palmer, 1962.

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## Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*)

**Identification:** This is a relatively common and widespread but inconspicuous species, usually found only in areas of overgrown aquatic vegetation, where it is more often heard than seen. It is the only grebe with a short, chicken-like bill that is ringed with black during the breeding season, and the dark eye is ringed with white. There are no head plumes or bright head colors; the entire bird is brownish to grayish, and the size of a small duck. In summer the loud, often whinnying calls or repeated *cow* notes coming from heavy marsh vegetation provide easy identification.

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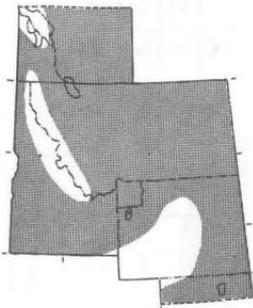
**Status:** A summer resident on overgrown marshes nearly throughout the area, except in high mountain and semidesert areas. Uncommon to rare in the mountain parks; not yet reported from Yoho and Kootenay parks.

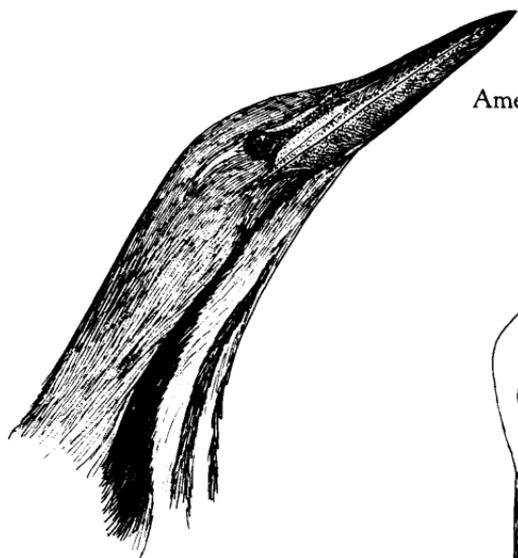
**Habitats and Ecology:** Primarily found on heavily overgrown ponds or marshes, especially during the breeding season.

**Seasonality:** Recorded in Montana from the last week of April until the third week of December, and in Wyoming from April 11 to October 25. Nest or egg records for these states range from April 29 to July, and newly hatched young have been observed from June 5 to August 14.

**Comments:** The unusual bill shape of this species sets it apart from the other North American grebes, and its diet consists of a wide variety of invertebrates including crayfish, leeches, and insects, as well as some fishes. Thus, it often lives in shallow, fish-free ponds, although during migration the birds often are also seen on deeper lakes. Pied-bills tend to leave the area earlier in the fall than other grebes.

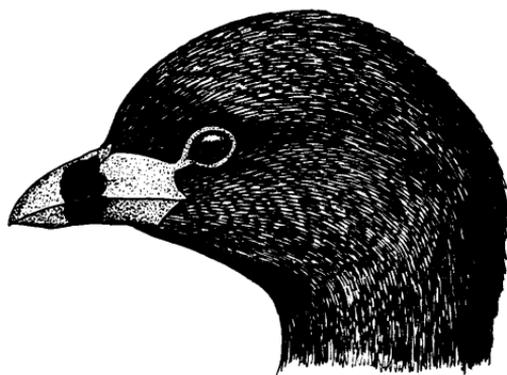
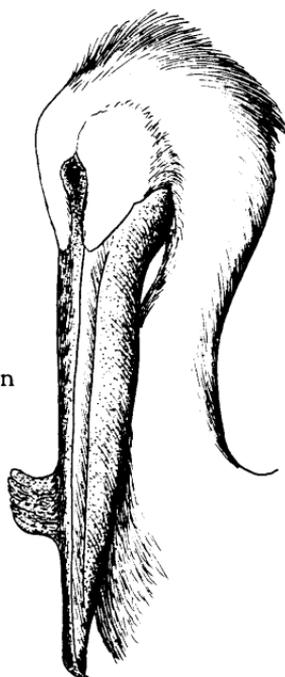
**Suggested Reading:** Glover, 1953; McCallister, 1964; Chabreck, 1963; Kirby, 1976.





American Bittern

White Pelican



Pied-billed Grebe

## Horned Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*)

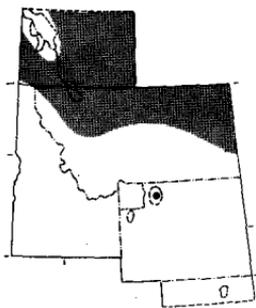
**Identification:** In breeding plumage both sexes have a narrow band of golden-yellow feathers extending from the eye to the nape, and a reddish-orange neck and breast. Non-breeding birds have a sharply bicolored head pattern, with a distinct black "cap" well separated from the white cheek area. A wide variety of squeals, croaks and other calls are uttered on the breeding grounds.

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**Status:** Breeds in varying abundance in the northern parts of the region, mainly on marshes, ponds and shallow lakes. Has bred on Swiftcurrent Lake, Glacier National Park; may once have bred at Yellowstone but no recent evidence for this. Bred in 1978 east of Yellowstone, at Beck Lake.

**Habitats and Ecology:** Breeding typically occurs on fairly small ponds (under 2.5 acres), with the pairs scattered and nesting in clumps of rather sparse emergent vegetation.

**Seasonality:** Spring records in Montana are from April 21 to May 22, and fall migration peaks in late September. Wyoming records are from May 5 to November 11. The earliest egg record is for June 12 (Montana), but young have been reported as early as June 22 in southern Alberta. In Alberta the fall migration usually occurs in October, with a few birds staying on into early November.

**Comments:** Nesting is largely limited to prairies and foothill areas, and summer occurrences in the mountain parks often appear to be of non-breeding individuals.

**Suggested Reading:** Fjeldsa, 1973; Faaborg, 1976; McAllister, 1964.

## Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*)

**Identification:** In breeding plumage the black "cap," white cheeks, and rust-colored neck provide a unique combination for grebes. This species is the largest of the three generally dark-colored grebes, and is easily separated from the similar-sized western grebe by color. In non-breeding plumage the large size and rather heavy, tapered and yellowish bill is quite distinctive. Like the other grebes, a variety of rather loud screaming and wailing notes are typical during the breeding season.

**Status:** Limited as a breeder to the northwestern portion of our area, with park breeding records so far available only for Banff, where it is also regular on the Bow River in spring. It has also been found nesting near Jasper and Watertown lakes. On the lakes of central Alberta it is probably the commonest diving bird, even in areas of rather heavy human use.

**Habitats and Ecology:** Associated with larger ponds and lakes during the breeding season, and nesting either as solitary pairs or in loose colonies.

**Seasonality:** Montana migration records are from April 22 to May 22 in spring, and from August 13 to October 17 in fall. Nests in that state have been reported from June 4 until mid-July. That time period also appears typical for southern Saskatchewan. Fall migration in Alberta is usually over by early November. Alberta egg records are from May 24 to June 21.

**Comments:** Like other grebes, this species apparently migrates at night, and is rarely observed in any kind of flight behavior. Also in common with other grebes, the young are fed for a prolonged period by their parents, and ride on their backs for extended periods prior to fledging.

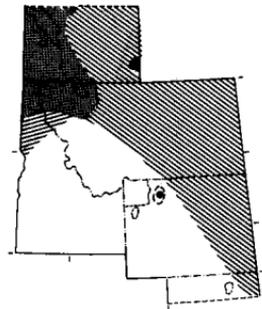
**Suggested Reading:** Palmer, 1962; Chamberlain, 1967.

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## Eared Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*)

*Identification:* This small grebe is the only one that has a black neck and chest in breeding plumage, and a head that is also black except for a fan of golden feathers extending back from the eye. The bill is short and sharply pointed; in non-breeding plumage this short bill, white cheeks that are smudged with black, and a generally dark gray body coloration help to identify the species. On the breeding grounds a frog-like call is often uttered.

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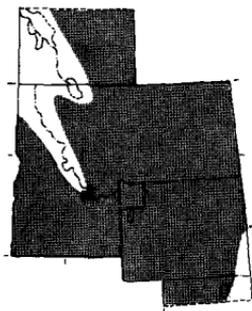
*Status:* A generally widespread breeder in the area, except in the montane lakes. The only park for which there are breeding records is Yellowstone, where breeding has occurred on many lakes and ponds. Occasional breeding in other parks is probable, at least in the foothill areas.

*Habitats and Ecology:* Associated in the breeding season with rather shallow marshes and lakes having extensive reedbeds and submerged aquatic plants. Generally found in larger and more open ponds than either pied-billed grebes or horned grebes and, unlike these species, typically nesting in large colonies.

*Seasonality:* Montana migration records are from April 12 to May 14 in spring, and from September 2 to November 23 during fall. Fall records in Wyoming extend to December 4. Egg records for Wyoming are from May 10 to August 14. Colorado egg records are from May 10 to July 20.

*Comments:* This is the most gregarious of the smaller grebes; only it and the western grebe typically nest in colonies. It also is inclined to migrate in flocks, and often winters in flocks. In North America the species breeds largely in areas of grasslands and semi-arid habitats; it also breeds in Europe and Africa, where it is called the black-necked grebe.

*Suggested Reading:* McAllister, 1955, 1958; Palmer, 1962.



## Western Grebe (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*)

**Identification:** In all adult plumages this species is easily identified by its strongly black-and-white plumage pattern (black crown and hind-neck, white cheeks and foreneck), and its long, thin and swan-like neck. It is the largest of the grebes in overall length, and has a long, tapering, and stiletto-like bill. During the summer it utters a clear, two-noted whistle, *kreet, kreet*, that in light-phase individuals (which might be a separate species) is only single-noted. These birds also show white extending above the eye, and the bill is more bright orange-yellow rather than greenish yellow.

**Status:** A local summer breeder over much of the area, with breeding records in the parks apparently confined to Yellowstone (historic records only; no current evidence of breeding) and Glacier (historic record for North Fork of Flathead River).

**Habitats and Ecology:** Breeding typically occurs on permanent ponds and shallow lakes that are often slightly brackish and have large areas of open water as well as semiopen growths of emergent vegetation.

**Seasonality:** Montana spring migration dates are from April 20 to May 22, and fall migration is from late August to November 11. Wyoming dates are from April 12 to November 11. Young have been seen in Montana from June 11 to August 5.

**Comments:** After this book went to press the American Ornithologists' Union taxonomically separated the light-phase form of the western grebe as a separate species, to be called the Clark's grebe (*Aechmophorus clarkii*). In this form the white on the sides of the face extends above the eye, separating the red eye from the black crown, and the bill is more orange-tinted and less yellowish green. Both types occur in our region, but the more southerly Clark's grebe is distinctly rarer here than are the dark-phased birds. Some intermediate plumage types may also rarely occur.

**Suggested Reading:** Lawrence, 1950; Palmer, 1962; Nuechterlein, 1975.

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