

(Photo: Chris Talkington)



## Podicipedidae the GREBES

Grebes are aquatic birds that spend much of their time diving and swimming underwater in search of food. Five species of grebes have been documented in the Central Carolinas. One, the Pied-billed Grebe, has been found in small numbers every month of the year and local breeding has been confirmed. A second, the Horned Grebe, is a regular winter visitor found on our larger lakes. The remaining three grebes are rarities that have only periodically appeared on our largest lakes. They are usually found alone or in pairs and rarely in small numbers. Searching out rare grebes on our lakes during the winter can be a surprisingly enjoyable birding activity, but be sure to bring along a spotting scope as these birds tend to stay in the waters farthest from where people are active.

Non-birders often confuse grebes with ducks. However, despite an outward similarity of appearance, the two are physically very dissimilar. Upon closer inspection, many people find grebes to be odd-looking birds. This is especially true when one has been injured or killed and it is being examined in hand. Unlike ducks, grebes have lobed toes—not webbed feet—and their feet are situated far back on their body. Around the turn of the twentieth century, the discovery of a strange bird like a grebe in the region was often of great interest to local residents, and some accounts made the local newspapers:

“Mr. Crawford Steele was in the city [Concord] last night carrying with him a strange bird, his mission being to find out the name and habitation of the fowl. Research was made and it was found that the bird is a water fowl, and resembles in every detail the grebe, a common bird in all fresh water sections of the Northern Hemisphere. It is a four-toed podicipoid diving bird without tail feathers, and with the front toes lobed. The bird was killed by Mr. James Talbert on a branch several miles south of the city, and attracted considerable attention.”

—*The Charlotte Observer*, October 31, 1907

On April 2, 1909, the discovery of a grebe in Iredell County made the headlines in Charlotte’s *Evening Chronicle*. In fact, the editors considered the find of such interest that they chose to print the account above an announcement that President Taft had just accepted an invitation to visit Charlotte to help celebrate Mecklenburg Independence Day: “Mr. J.M. Kerr brought to our office Tuesday a bird that is seldom seen in these regions. It is what is known as a grebe and are natives of the northern parts of the United States. They have strong sharp bills and lobate toes and are usually found around rivers or swamps. The bird is about the size of a bantam chicken. It was seen to light on the barn at Mr. Kerr’s and fell to the ground apparently exhausted and was caught by one of the children.”

Most people are aware that egrets and herons were once the target of hunters supplying feathers for the millinery and clothing industries, but grebes and many other types of birds were used as well. Ladies’ boas and muffs made of “[f]ancy grebe” feathers were advertised for sale in the Carolinas in the 1870s, and despite more than two decades of calls for a ban on bird hunting for use in the millinery industry, outfits adorned with feathers or wings were still the height of Charlotte fashion in 1910. One local advertisement featured: “Neat Shopping Suit of Mixed Worsted... Such a suit as the one illustrated meets all the requirements of smartness and good taste for general fall shopping and walking use, and the lines of both coat and skirt are particularly graceful and fine. The material is mixed worsted in cinnamon and brown tone and the grebe wing on the hat shows this tone combined with a warm coral pink, which is most charming.”

By 1918, new federal and state hunting laws, along with a nationwide educational campaign sponsored by the Audubon Society, began to provide some protection for the remaining grebe populations. Today, the breeding ranges of some grebes, like the Horned Grebe, have noticeably contracted. Recent data suggests several grebe populations are still in need of conservation efforts.