

Pied-billed Grebe *Podilymbus podiceps*



Folk Name: Sinkin' Peter, Hell-diver

Status: Winter Resident and sporadic Breeder

Abundance: Fairly Common

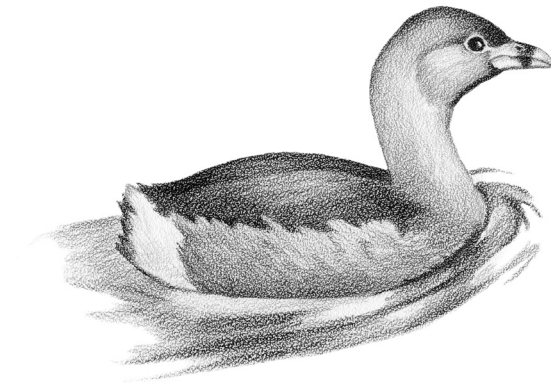
Habitat: Lakes, ponds

The Pied-billed Grebe has a plain, drab brown appearance in both its winter and breeding plumage, but breeding adults have a black ring around their bill and a black throat. It is the most commonly encountered grebe in our region, and at 13 ½ inches, it is about the same size as the Bufflehead, our smallest duck. Like our other grebes, it is usually found alone or in very small numbers, and it tends to remain as unobtrusive as possible. It can show up on any size lake or pond throughout the region. What do these secretive, little waterbirds eat? The results of a stomach content analysis of a Pied-billed Grebe in the Piedmont indicated the bird had consumed a large number of wolf spiders and giant water bugs, a variety of other insects in lesser quantities, and at least one frog.

Pied-billed Grebes have been reported on almost all Christmas Bird Counts held in the region since 1937. The largest number counted in one day was a total of 33 reported on the Chester CBC in December 1994. During the late 1800s in Chester County, Leverett Loomis described the Pied-billed Grebe as common in winter, but most numerous during migration. Today, however, higher overall numbers are reported during the winter months, but many are still seen in spring and fall.

A few examples of reports of early fall visitors include: one found by Charlie Sellers in Charlotte on September 11, 1939, and one seen by Paul Hart on the pond at Crowders Mountain State Park on August 3, 1986. A winter-plumaged bird was found at the base of the WSOC tower in Charlotte on October 11, 1959, and two more were found the following year at the base of another tower on October 2, 1960. Kim Garrett found one at Reedy Creek Nature Preserve on September 19, 1999. A local wildlife rehabilitator received an injured, immature Pied-billed Grebe for medical treatment on September 20, 2012. The bird had been turned over to a vet in Huntersville after it was discovered with a gunshot wound to its wing.

Occasionally, Pied-billed Grebes have been reported in the Central Carolinas during late spring migration and in the summer months. A very fat (“extra heavy”) Pied-billed Grebe was collected in Mecklenburg County on May 4, 1996, and was sent to the North Carolina State Museum. The bird was in heavy molt on the head and body as well. Lisa Beckstrom reported one at McAlpine Park in Charlotte on May 24, 1998. Flo Cobey observed one on Lake Wylie on June 28, 1979, which was later called “a rare June record for the inland part of the state.”



Joe Norwood found a “mature” Pied-billed Grebe in a small pond about 10 miles east of Charlotte on 1 July and again on 4 July in 1958. One grebe was seen on June 28, 2009, at Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge, and another was regularly sighted on the observation ponds there during the month of July in 2011. Immature grebes appear to start dispersing through this region as early as July (post-breeding dispersal). Local birders have periodically reported finding juvenile-plumaged Pied-billed Grebes in July over the past three decades.

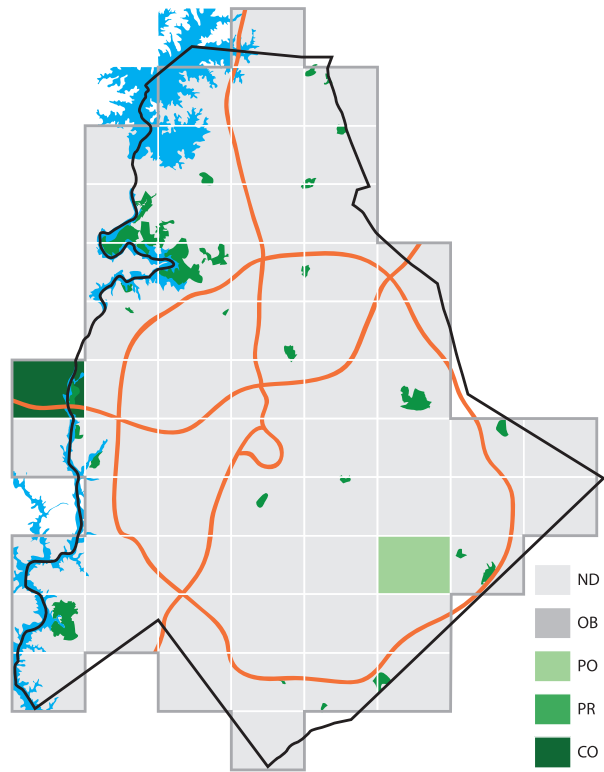
The Pied-billed Grebe is a sporadic breeder in the Carolina Piedmont. Volunteers with the South Carolina Breeding Bird Atlas recorded “possible” breeding of the Pied-billed Grebe in Cherokee County during the South Carolina Breeding Bird Atlas project, and breeding was confirmed in Kershaw, Greenville, and McCormick counties. Nests have been documented in the North Carolina Piedmont in Wake, Chatham, and Durham counties.



Pied-billed Grebe on nest in Mecklenburg County.
(Jeff Lemons)

Volunteers with the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas confirmed nesting of the Pied-billed Grebe two years in a row in Charlotte. Adults with striped young were observed amongst several broods of Wood Ducks at an industrial settling pond at a large facility named ReVenture (the old Clariant Plant) during the summer of 2011. Jeff Lemons photographed a nest there in 2012. This is the first confirmation of the nesting of this grebe in the Central Carolinas. Birds have been heard calling at Pee Dee National Wildlife Refuge in the summer, but no nesting has been confirmed.

The Pied-billed Grebe has been placed on the state Watch List in North Carolina because its breeding population is rare to uncommon and it is considered vulnerable.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:

Very Local (PR/0, CO/1)