

Red-necked Grebe *Podiceps grisegena*



Folk Name: Sou-westerly Loon

Status: Winter Visitor

Abundance: Very Rare to Rare

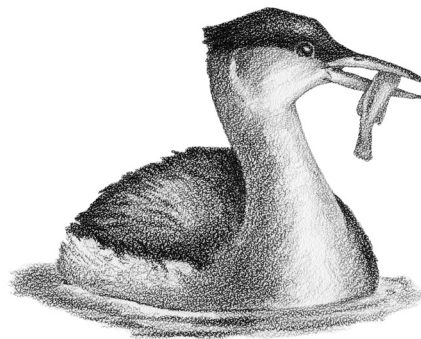
Habitat: Lakes, ponds (rarely)

At 20 inches, the Red-necked Grebe is a much larger grebe than either the Horned or Pied-billed. This grebe has a long dusky neck with a heavy, tapered, yellowish bill. Small numbers of these birds generally winter along the Atlantic Coast each year. They are rare and irregular winter visitors to large inland lakes in both Carolinas. Most of our early reports are of solitary birds, and almost all our sightings have been reported within the Catawba River watershed.

The first recorded appearance of this species in the region was a single Red-necked Grebe discovered by Bill Brokaw on Lake Wylie on the surprisingly early fall date of October 27, 1979. Fifteen years later, David and Marcia Wright found a lone Red-necked Grebe swimming on Lake Norman while they were birding from their boat on November 13, 1995. This sighting was confirmed by photograph, and this bird spent much of the winter there. Three years later, Lex Glover found one on Lake Wateree on November 14, 1998, and then on March 10, 2000, Tom Lorenzin reported three had shown up on Lake Norman in Iredell County.

A pair of Red-necked Grebes was found on Lake Hickory in March 2003, and three were sighted at Lake Don T. Howell in Cabarrus County in November 2004. One was found on Lake Norman near the Energy Explorium during the first week of January 2008, and another showed up near there in early January 2010. Over the next month, the latter bird moved back and forth across the Mecklenburg–Lincoln county line. David Wright provided this account of this grebe and an Eared Grebe that joined it over Valentine’s Day weekend that year:

The Eared Grebe and Red-necked Grebe were present again today in the waters behind the Lake Norman dam. The Eared Grebe was spending most of its time by itself. ...The Red-necked Grebe was loafing with the growing flock of Horned Grebes that are often seen along the western shore. There were 80+ Horned Grebes in the flock and another half-dozen or more scattered about the area. A number of Common Loons and the expected gulls (Ring-bills, Bonaparte’s and a first-year Herring) were also seen.



A Red-necked Grebe found at Latta Plantation Nature Preserve made the highlight list of the Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count on December 19, 2010. Three years later, Chris Talkington photographed a Red-necked Grebe on Lake Norman on November 16, 2013, swimming in the company of three Red-throated Loons. This was the 15th Red-necked Grebe found in the Central Carolinas since the first one was recorded in the region in 1979.

In early 2014, everything changed. Much of the Great Lakes froze solid. Scientists estimated that it was the highest level of ice coverage in 34 years and the second highest level of ice on the Great Lakes on record. Thousands of birds were killed, and tens of thousands were forced to move south. In February and March, an unprecedented “invasion” of Red-necked Grebes descended upon inland lakes in both Carolinas. Some even ended up on small park ponds. Reports were received from Cleveland, Gaston, Spartanburg, Mecklenburg, Cabarrus, Lincoln,



Red-necked Grebe on Lake Norman. (Jeff Lemons)

Iredell, Caldwell, Randolph, and Catawba counties. Up to 29 birds were found at individual locations and a total of 42 were counted on Lake Hickory alone—almost three times the previous total number recorded throughout our entire region prior to this incident. Most left the region in March, but at least one lingered as late as 12 April. Several photographers were able to get excellent photographs of this historic event.

Sightings appear to have returned to normal since the spring of 2014. One Red-necked Grebe was found on Lake Hickory on November 15, 2014, one was seen in Mecklenburg County on December 14, 2014, and two were seen on Lake Tillery in Stanly County on February 22, 2015.