



# General Field Notes

James F. Parnell

## **Sight Record of a Western Grebe at Carolina Beach, N.C., With Comments on its Occurrence in the Southeast**

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On 28 December 1969, the day following the Wilmington area Christmas count, I was birding alone about 8:00 AM along the shore just north of the town of Carolina Beach. Strong northwest winds during the previous 24 hours had flattened the ocean and made the surf unusually calm. Numerous Red-throated Loons, a few Common Loons and Horned Grebes, and a flock of Bufflehead scattered along the ocean not far offshore were all feeding vigorously. The sky was clear, the sun still low but bright.

My attention was caught by a bird about the size of a Red-throated Loon but whose neck appeared to be only one-third to one-half as thick as in nearby individuals of that species. Moving down the beach a few yards to get a better angle of light, I studied the bird at leisure for about 10 minutes through 9X35 binoculars and a 20X Bushnell spotting scope. There was ample opportunity to compare the unusual individual directly with both species of loons swimming nearby and with a Horned Grebe that conveniently flew in and landed just in front of it. During this time it was approximately 60 to 100 yards offshore, and 120 to 200 yards distant from me. It dived occasionally but did not fly. The suspicion, then the certainty, dawned on me that I was observing a Western Grebe (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*).

The bird seemed slightly taller than the Red-throated Loon because it sat on the water with its neck quite erect, making the loon appear to be "hunched down." The plumage was very dark on the back and wings, the back of the neck, and the top of the head. Its throat, the front and sides of the neck, and the chest and belly were white. The

line of division between black and white on the head and neck was very sharp along its entire length, quite in contrast with the fuzzy grayish shading between light and dark areas on the necks of some of the loons nearby. When the bird swam directly away from me, the white sides of the neck, contrasting with the black stripe down the back of the neck, could be clearly seen. The black stripe was thinner along the middle of the neck than at the top or bottom. The bill was long, thin, and yellow, and the angle it made with the forehead was very abrupt, almost approaching 90 degrees. When the Horned Grebe flew in, this bird was much taller and longer-billed. I checked all these field marks against the illustration and text in Robbins, Bruun, and Zim's *A Guide to Field Identification: Birds of North America* and found no discrepancies. Compared to the other species around it, this bird gave the appearance of being in stately, formal evening dress. Its carriage as well as its rarity gave it "class." This was my first experience with the species.

When I called James Parnell to report my find, he and his house guests went immediately to Carolina Beach but could not find the bird. As I was describing the bird over the phone, Dr. Parnell asked, "Could it have been a Great Crested Grebe?" Only then did I remember reading in several places that Western Grebes seen on the East Coast might possibly be winter plumage individuals of the European species *Podiceps cristatus*. This species has never been recorded in North America. The significant difference listed by the field guides to European birds is that *P. cristatus* has a pinkish rather than a yellowish bill. The bill of the bird I saw was a clear yellow.

My curiosity was piqued by the similarity in these two species, however, so after returning to New Jersey, I began a more detailed study of the occurrences of the Western Grebe in the eastern part of the nation, visiting the American Museum of Natural History to study specimens of both species. Results of this research will be submitted for publication when the study is complete, but a summary of the salient points as regards field identification of these two species is in order here. Discrimination between them is next to impossible in the field. Examination of several score specimens of each species indicates great variation in the amount of light and dark areas on the bill. Under any but the best light conditions, "yellowish" and "pinkish" could be problematical. Pictures in the field guides that show the black on the head as extending down to the eye in one species and leaving a white line over the eye in the other are misleading; there is great variation in both species as to where the division between white and black occurs. There apparently is a longer white wing-stripe in the Western Grebe than in the Great Crested Grebe, which to judge by the pictures I could find has only a white speculum (I could not unfold the wings of the specimens to check this). There is, however, one clear distinction between these two species. The Western Grebe never has, and the Great Crested Grebe always has, white upper wing coverts, so that in flight the Great Crested Grebe would appear to have a white bar on the leading edge of the inner wing as well as a white speculum in the secondary feathers. But, as Dean Amadon of the AMNS staff put it to me when I mentioned this distinction to him, "How often do you see a grebe flying?" Since most water birds have their wings tucked under their back and shoulder feathers when at rest, this field mark would not usually be seen.

A search of the literature indicates there is only one specimen of the Western Grebe from the Carolinas, and indeed from the entire Atlantic coast: a bird taken at McClellanville, S.C., on the astonishing date of 22 June in 1936. This specimen is in the Charleston Museum (*Auk*, 53:438).

There are three previous sight records for North Carolina, the first of which was in the Wilmington area. Mrs. C.K. Bryan, now of Phoenixville, Pa., saw an individual on 29 December 1956, while on the Wilmington Christmas count, but did not turn the record in for the census because she was alone at the time and because of the rarity of her find. She was familiar with the species from previous sightings in the western states, however, and at the urging of Mrs. Cecil Appleberry the record with accompanying details was submitted to B. Rhett Chamberlain, who was then Regional Editor for *Audubon Field Notes*. Mrs. Bryan observed the bird offshore at Wrightsville Beach under good conditions (*Audubon Field Notes*, 11:255, and correspondence with Mrs. Bryan and

Mrs. Appleberry). On 30 March 1959 James Parnell and Thomas Quay found a Western Grebe on the North Pond at Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge; and Parnell and Franklin Roberts saw another on Lake Johnson just south of Raleigh on 20 December 1961 (*Chat*, 26:17f).

Two sight records are in the literature from South Carolina: two individuals were seen offshore at Ocean Drive Beach in Horry County early on 14 April 1957 by Robert Overing, William Hamnett, and B.R. Chamberlain (*Audubon Field Notes*, 11:255), and a single individual was seen at Charleston on 23 November 1966 by Norman Chamberlain (*Chat*, 31:24).

The species has been sighted three times in Virginia: at Yorktown on 4 December 1963 Frederic Scott discovered a single bird (*Raven*, 35:46f); another was seen by many observers from the Washington area at Dulles Airport from 14 to 19 October 1964 (*Raven*, 36:26f); another was far inland at Claytor Lake in Pulaski County from 24 January to 27 February 1965. This individual was found by M. Kathy Klimkiewicz and J.W. Akers and seen by several other observers (*Raven*, 36:77). This last is the only record I have been able to discover from the entire southern Appalachian mountain region. Apparently, in both northern and southern states, most individuals of this species that manage to cross the mountains push on to the coast.

Elsewhere in the southeastern states I can find only two records from Kentucky (Robert M. Mengel, *The Birds of Kentucky*, p. 154) and one from Grenada Reservoir in Mississippi (*Audubon Field Notes*, 19:385). Georgia, Alabama, and Tennessee have not yet recorded the species. There are seven records from the coasts of Florida, ranging from Jacksonville around to Pensacola, with the species reported twice from the Tampa Bay area three years apart (Alexander Sprunt Jr., *Florida Bird Life*, first published in 1954 but see the Addendum dated June 1963 in later copies; also *Audubon Field Notes*, 4:199, 9:251, 11:259, 13:149, 19:372, and 19:463). The grand total for the area south of the Potomac and Ohio Rivers and east of the Mississippi River is one specimen and 19 sightings. This is reasonable considering that the bird's general flight route lies southwestward from its breeding grounds on freshwater lakes in the western states toward the Pacific coast. Strays should be watched for, however, especially along the coast, and identification should be made with care.

## **Black-necked Stilts Breeding In Onslow County, N.C.**

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Black-necked Stilts (*Himantopus mexicanus*) were found for the first time in an impoundment at West Onslow Beach, Onslow County, N.C., during the summer of 1969. At least five were observed on 21 June 1969, 14 on 22 June 1969 (*Chat*, 33:106), and as many as 15 were still present on 11 August 1969. The behavior of these birds indicated they were nesting in the vicinity, but no nests were found in 1969.

An intensive search on 31 May 1970 disclosed four nests with four eggs each and one nest with one egg in this impoundment. Ten adults feigning injury, pretending to feed, and calling loudly were counted in the vicinity of these nests on this visit. On 15 June 1970 I found that these 10 adults were still present and that all nests had apparently hatched successfully. I returned to the impoundment on 6 July 1970 and observed four half-grown young feeding near an adult. A total of 16 Black-necked Stilts were counted on this visit.

For nesting activities at Cape Hatteras National Seashore see *Chat* (21:24-25, 1957; 24:105, 1960; 25:17, 1961; 26:103, 1962; and 27:58, 1963), and for possible nesting at North River Marsh at Beaufort, N.C., see *Chat*, 27:55, 1963. At present, Cape Hatteras National Seashore and West Onslow Beach are the only North Carolina sites where nesting of the Black-necked Stilt definitely occurs.