

Review of Wintering by Eared Grebes in the Southeastern United States

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Forty years ago the Eared Grebe, *Podiceps nigricollis*, was unrecorded in any of the southeastern United States and was rare in all parts of eastern North America. The eastern limits of both breeding and wintering distribution of the North American subspecies, *P. n. californicus*, were approximately along a line from southern Manitoba to southern Texas (A.O.U. 1931, 1957). In 1948 the species was first recorded in Louisiana (Lowery 1974:106), and wintering records began to accumulate in the Northeastern States (Bull 1974:55). The first Eared Grebe was reported in Florida in 1953 (Sprunt 1954), and from South Carolina in 1959 (Dawn 1959). The species was first found in several Southeastern States in the early 1960s. Buckley (1968a) reviewed the increasing number of records in eastern North America, but listed only a baker's dozen from the Atlantic coast south of New York.

Although the most recent versions of state check-lists and bird books for the Southeastern States indicate that the Eared Grebe occurs regularly, if still somewhat uncommonly, there seems to be no general summary of its spread into the Southeast as a wintering or migrant species. This paper provides such a summary through the winter 1984-85. We believe that such summaries can increase our understanding of changing avian distributional patterns, especially as they become available for enough species to allow comparison.

Clapp et al. (1982:118) reviewed the record of occurrences of the Eared Grebe through 1978 for the coastal Southeastern States. For this report we have further extracted occurrence records from *American Birds* and regional journals from 1979 through 1985. Because most reports of the Eared Grebe in the Southeast are of wintering birds, we report our information in the terms of winter seasons, essentially from August of one year through May of the next. The few records of Eared Grebes from summer probably represent wintering individuals that failed to return to their breeding grounds. These birds may foreshadow breeding populations in the Southeast (Lowery 1974).

Maryland. There was no record of the Eared Grebe in Maryland in Buckley's (1968a) summary, and Maryland was not included in the report by Clapp et al. (1982). The species was first reported in Maryland in the 1966-67 season (Russell 1967), and next in 1971-72. Eared Grebes have been reported in eight of 18 winter seasons, with four separate reports in 1982-83. Four of the first five reports were from Ocean City, but there have been no reports from there since 1976. There is a single published photographic record (Blom 1981). Reported dates of winter occurrence in Maryland are 27 September to 28 April.

Virginia. The Eared Grebe was first reported in Virginia in the winter 1961-62. The second report was for 1964-65, and the third for 1965-66. The first specimen record, and the fourth report, was for 1966-67 (Buckley 1968a,b). Most reports are of single birds, with two individuals being the maximum noted at once. Virginia birds were reported from three localities in 1966-67 and in 1980-81, and from two localities in 1972-73; other reports are from only one locality per year. Nearly half of all reports and most of the

earlier ones are from Craney Island, Norfolk County, but the majority of recent records are from Chincoteague National Wildlife Refuge. Some of the records are from inland lakes rather than from coastal areas. The species has been reported at least once in 15 of 24 seasons since the initial report, and five of six winter seasons beginning with 1979-80. The reported dates of winter occurrence in Virginia are 16 August to 18 April.

North Carolina. The first Eared Grebe record in North Carolina was in 1964-65, the second in 1967-68, and the third in 1970-71. Records through 1978 were summarized by Clapp et al. (1982). From the time of the first record, birds have been seen in 12 of 21 winter seasons. Most reports are for single birds; occasionally two have been reported. Dates of reported winter occurrence in North Carolina are 7 October to 30 April.

South Carolina. The first record was for 1958-59. This was probably a vagrant individual rather than a precursor of an extension of range, because it predates other East Coast records by several years. The next occurrence reported was 1972-73, the third in 1974-75, and the fourth in 1980-81. Thus there are but four published records in a span of 27 winter seasons, or three in 13 seasons if the bird seen in 1958-59 is considered an early vagrant. Reported dates of winter occurrence in South Carolina are 13 January to 15 May.

Georgia. In this state the first Eared Grebe was reported in the 1978-79 season. Six birds were reported in 1979-80, two in 1980-81, and single birds in 1982-83 and 1984-85. Thus once the species was found in Georgia it was recorded in five of seven seasons. Dates of winter occurrence in Georgia are 18 August to 22 March.

Florida. The first Eared Grebe in Florida was reported in 1952-53, the second in 1956-57, and the third in 1958-59, all on the Gulf coast. On the Atlantic coast, however, the first was reported in 1956-57, the second in 1964-65, and the third in 1965-66. Throughout the state, there were at least 45 reports by 1979 (about 1.5 reports per year), indicating a rather widespread pattern of occurrence. Eared Grebes have been reported annually in Florida since 1970-71, with up to 20 individuals at a given locality and with several reports for most years. Reported dates of winter occurrence in Florida are 14 September to 23 May.

Alabama. The Eared Grebe was first reported in Alabama in 1959-60. Imhof (1976) and Clapp et al. (1982) summarized 21 reports, many from inland areas, through 1975-76, by which time the species was occurring regularly in the state. Most reports are of individual birds, the largest number seen being six. Dates of winter occurrence range from 12 August to 21 April.

Mississippi. The first record of the species in this state was in 1961-62 (Williams and Clawson 1963). Six reports from the coastal portion of the state were listed by Clapp et al. (1982), but the species is more common, and more frequently reported, inland than coastally. Eared Grebes have been seen annually since 1977-78. Most reports have been of one or a few birds, but larger numbers, up to 64 individuals, were seen at Hattiesburg in 1980. Wintering grebes have been reported from 13 August to 31 May.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The years of first reports of occurrence of the Eared Grebe as a more or less regular wintering bird in the coastal states of the Southeast are, except for Maryland, in a southward chronological progression: Maryland, 1966-67; Virginia, 1961-62; North Carolina, 1964-65; South Carolina, 1972-73; Georgia, 1978-79. Eared Grebes were

TABLE 1. Cumulative numbers of Eared Grebes reported by month¹, winters 1953-54 to 1984-85, in the coastal southeastern United States.

State	AUG	SEP	OCT	NOV	DEC	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY
Maryland	-	1	1	-	2	1	1	2	4	-
Virginia	2	1	4	6	8	4	3	4	3	-
North Carolina	-	-	1	-	10	6	4	5	4	-
South Carolina	-	-	-	-	1	2	-	-	-	1
Georgia	1	8	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Florida	-	4	8	37	20	16	41	5	15	3
Alabama	1	1	1	-	7	7	3	1	3	-
Mississippi	9	2	-	55	85	18	60	68	-	7
Total	13	17	17	98	133	54	112	85	29	11

Percent Seen by Month

Southeast	2	3	3	17	23	9	20	15	5	2
Northeast ²	0	3	8	12	17	20	18	18	4	1

¹ Birds seen over a period of several months are listed each month they were present. Reports for which no date was given (e.g. "fall") are omitted. If number present was not stated, the report was assumed to be of one bird.

² Buckley 1968a

reported in Florida nearly a decade before they were found in other Southeastern States east of Louisiana, and were reported in both Mississippi and Alabama before they were found in Virginia. This may support Buckley's (1968a:536) suggestion that the wintering birds on the Gulf and Atlantic coasts may not be derived from the same breeding population. With isolated exceptions, however, the breeding range in North America seems to include only one nearly continuous population (A.O.U. 1983). The three banded grebes recovered in the East—two on the Gulf coasts of Alabama and Florida, the other at Niagara Falls, Ontario—had all been banded in Saskatchewan (Imhof 1976, Jehl and Yochem 1986). Thus, it is probably more correct to suggest that the Gulf and Atlantic coast birds merely represent extensions of the wintering range in two directions, one eastward from Texas across the Gulf Coast States and the other eastward from south-central Canada and the adjacent United States across the Great Lakes to the Atlantic coast and thence southward.

The timing of occurrence of wintering Eared Grebes in the Southeastern States (Table 1) is comparable to that reported for Northeastern coastal areas. In the latter area, Buckley (1968a) characterized the species as "normally appearing in November, occasionally in September or October, reaching its greatest numbers between December and early March, and then abruptly vanishing in late March." This summary applies almost equally well to the Southeast, where the now greater number of records suggests a somewhat wider period of winter occurrence.

We suggest that readers be aware that this paper discusses reports and records of occurrences of the Eared Grebe, not occurrences per se. We do not believe that first

occurrences are always detected or, conversely, that first reports always represent first occurrences. This is particularly a concern in areas where the number of potential observers is relatively low. We suggest that the relative paucity of reports from some states (Table 1) results from the relatively small number of observers in those areas. The correlation between the number of members of the American Birding Association (1984 membership list) in each state and the number of reports of Eared Grebes from the states is 0.78.

We have further attempted to distinguish between "reports" and "records," reserving the latter term for occurrences that are documented by a specimen or photograph. We do not necessarily reject undocumented ("sight") records, but we prefer to be able to verify occurrences many years after the fact. This precaution is particularly important where a species of similar appearance, in this case the Horned Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*), is known to occur abundantly in the area under consideration (Clapp et al. 1982, A.O.U. 1983). We also point out the possibility that some of the reports may eventually be considered unacceptable by state or regional records committees.

We further note that this summary has been prepared on the basis of published reports and records only. It is very likely that many observations of Eared Grebes in the Southeastern States have not been reported in the literature. This is less likely to be a problem with "first" reports of occurrence than with subsequent reports. Our study of the summary of published reports of occurrence suggests that once sightings become regular, they may no longer be reported. This might be the case either within a given year or on a year-to-year basis. Our analysis of Eared Grebe records, therefore, may be biased relative to the number of birds actually present in any year, the number of localities in which the species occurred in any year, or the number of years in which the species occurred in a given region. Another complicating factor is that observers tend to revisit certain favored localities, especially in search of a particular uncommon species, rather than to survey all possible localities equally well.

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NEW CHECKLISTS

Checklist of North Carolina Birds, 1986, was published by the North Carolina Biological Survey. The list of 395 species officially recognized as occurring in the state and its adjacent offshore waters uses brackets to indicate species of provisional status, an asterisk for regular nesting, a plus for other categories of nesting, "I" for introduced species, and "E" for extinct species. Compiled by David S. Lee and Eloise F. Potter, the four-page list is based on the recommendations of the North Carolina Records Committee. An introduction explains the organization of the committee and the criteria for documentation of species new to the state. Copies of the list were distributed at the Fiftieth Anniversary Meeting of Carolina Bird Club, which was held at Raleigh, N.C., 1-3 May 1987. The new state checklist may be purchased from the North Carolina State Museum of Natural Sciences, P.O. Box 27647, Raleigh, N.C. 27611. The price is 25¢ each or 30 for \$5, plus 50¢ for postage and shipping. Make checks payable to the NCDA Museum Extension Fund.

Also released at the Fiftieth Anniversary Meeting was a checklist of the birds of the Raleigh area, which was compiled by Robert J. Hader and Harry E. LeGrand Jr. This pocket-sized list offers information on the seasonal distribution of the regularly occurring species. Published by the N.C. Biological Survey in cooperation with Wake Audubon Society, the Raleigh checklist is available from the N.C. State Museum. The price and ordering instructions are the same as for the state list.