

First North Carolina Record of Clark's Grebe (*Aechmophorus clarkii*)

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At mid-day on 15 March 2003, while scanning the ocean from the dunes at the old lighthouse location at Cape Hatteras, Dare County, NC, Davis, LeGrand, and Derb Carter discovered a Clark's Grebe (*Aechmophorus clarkii*). Davis, who first observed the grebe in his spotting scope, initially thought it was a Western Grebe (*A. occidentalis*), which had been reported over a dozen times previously in the state (Avendex database, Redshank Software, Wake Forest, NC). On a second look, he suggested the bird was a Clark's Grebe, which had never before been reported in the state, based on the bright bill color and paleness around the eye. LeGrand and Carter quickly found the bird with their scopes and agreed with Davis's identification.

We watched the bird closely for several hours as it swam, dived, and slept in the same general area in the surf, just outside the groins and breakers. A few minutes after the initial observation, Carter took video through a scope. We called Wayne Irvin and Brad Carlson, who were also birding in the area, and they arrived to see the grebe about 30 minutes later. The bird was observed through several scopes with 20–60x zooms, at a distance of about 150 yards. The observers were looking down on the bird from the dune line, which gave excellent viewing angles. Lighting conditions were good, with high thin overcast and no heat-wave distortion.

The bird was much larger than nearby Horned Grebes (*Podiceps auritus*), and about the same size as nearby Red-throated Loons (*Gavia stellata*). The neck was very long and slender, almost as long as the body. The breast, front, and sides of the neck were a clean white; the back, wings, and flanks gray. The flanks were much paler than the back and rump. The top of the head, nape, and the back of the neck were blackish to dark gray, with this color noticeably darker than the gray of the back. This color separation was very obvious when viewing the bird from the back when it was facing away. The dark area on the back of the neck was very clean along the edges and was confined to a stripe down the center. When the bird turned its head and neck, the white sides tended to make this dark stripe appear very narrow along the upper portions of the neck.

The area behind, below, and in front of the bright red eye was mostly white. Between the eye and the dark of the cap was a grayish area, typical of basic plumage. The dark cap extended from the back of the head over the eye to the forehead near the bill as a dark arc, not in a straight line. The bill was quite long, thin, and pointed, with the lower mandible angled upward, giving

the bill an upturned appearance, suggesting a female. The forehead was quite steep, further accentuating the upturned look of the bill. The bill was a bright yellowish-orange with no gray or greenish areas. The bird did not fly during our observations, so the open wings were not seen.

The grebe was not relocated at the site over the next few days. However, Russ Tyndall, Patricia Tyndall, and Jeff Lewis observed a Clark's Grebe, presumably the same bird, about 10 miles to the southwest in the surf near Hatteras village, on 19 March (Davis 2003).

The five original observers are quite familiar with Western Grebes and Clark's Grebes in the western United States and had previously seen several Western Grebes in North Carolina. This individual stood out quite readily as a Clark's to all observers on 15 March. The possibility of this bird being a hybrid Western/Clark's is discounted due to the whiteness around the eye and the yellow-orange bill color with no apparent darker areas that would give the bill a more greenish, less bright cast.

The three previous East Coast reports of Clark's Grebe are all from Virginia: Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel, 11 February 2000; Fort Story, Virginia Beach area, 18 and 31 December 2001; and in the Fort Story area again 30 December 2002 to 1 January 2003 (Iloff 2003). The last bird was videotaped, thereby constituting the first documentation for the East Coast (Iloff 2003). It is possible that all of these sightings, plus the one in North Carolina, were of the same individual.

The Hatteras Clark's Grebe is the first report from North Carolina. The North Carolina Bird Records Committee accepted the written description of the bird provided by Davis; however, the committee did not accept still photos from Carter's video, "as the photos were not definitive enough for Committee members to rule out the similar Western Grebe or a possible hybrid" (LeGrand et al. 2004). Thus, Clark's Grebe has been placed on the Provisional List, but not the Official List for the state. We expect that the committee will review the video in the future, as this photographic material is more detailed or clearer than a still photo from the video.

Literature Cited

- Davis, R. 2003. Southern Atlantic region. *North American Birds* 57:333–336.
- Iloff, M. J. 2003. Middle Atlantic region. *North American Birds* 57:185–188.
- LeGrand, H. E., Jr., K. E. Camburn, S. Cooper, R. J. Davis, E. V. Dean, W. K. Forsythe, and R. L. Tyndall. 2004. 2003 Annual report of the North Carolina Bird Records Committee. *Chat* 68:1–5.