PODICEPS NIGRICOLLIS.

Illustrated and Coloured by W. B. Fisher, del. & 1881.

Water lilies by C. J. S. 1881.

PODICEPS NIGRICOLLIS.

Eared Grebe.

Colymbus nigricollis, Brehm, Blas. List of Birds of Europe, Engl. edit. p. 24.

—*recurvirostris*, Brehm.

Podiceps auritus, Temm. Man. d'Orn., tom. ii. p. 705, et tom. iv. p. 451 (not Linnæus).

I AM somewhat surprised that so many of my brother naturalists should fall into the error of assigning to this bird a northern habitat; I question if Linnæus ever saw it, and I believe that his *Podiceps auritus* has reference to the Slavonian Grebe of English authors. Yarrell adds to the confusion by stating that the bird is also found in the Falkland Islands and some parts of the United States, which it certainly is not. Under these circumstances, and with a doubt still remaining in my mind as to its identity with the *P. auritus* of Linnæus, I have no alternative but to follow Dr. Blasius, and adopt the specific term of *nigricollis* assigned to it by Brehm, retaining of course the trivial name of Eared Grebe, by which it has always been known amongst us.

In the British Islands the *Podiceps nigricollis* has been more frequently killed in summer than in winter, although I know of numerous instances in which it has been shot in the latter season. These lacustrine birds are truly interesting; for how varied and how differently adorned are the species of the minor subdivisions of this somewhat limited family. Those persons who do not study ornithology as a whole, but confine their attention to the birds of a single country, are not prepared for the fact that all our Grebes, although kept in this work under the one generic title of *Podiceps*, are representatives of as many genera as there are species, and that in Australia the present bird is represented by the *P. poliocephalus*, our little Grebe by the *P. gularis*, and our Great Crested Grebe by the *P. australis*; in other countries, too, similar representatives occur. This will prepare my readers for the fact that these forms are very generally dispersed, some being confined to the high northern latitudes, while others dwell in more temperate and even warmer climes, as is the case with the bird now before us. In England, which it visits annually, it frequents the southern and eastern counties, rather than the northern; in Holland and Germany it is not more numerous than with us; in some parts of France, in Spain, and Italy it becomes more common; while in northern Africa, from Morocco to Egypt, no water-bird can be more abundant, wherever meres and great reed-covered sheets of water occur. Every one who has visited that country, and particularly Algeria, testify to its abundance and wide-spread distribution. Dr. Heuglin found it breeding in Egypt, and the Rev. H. B. Tristram in Algeria. The notes respecting this species by the latter gentleman I find so interesting, that I make no apology for transcribing them.

"Every here and there we came upon a nest of the Little Grebe (*Podiceps minor*), and occasionally upon that of the Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*); but it was rather late for both these species, which build before the end of April, and already several broods had been hatched. Still fifty eggs of one, and about a dozen of the other, was not a bad morning's take. At length, in a little secluded opening, entirely surrounded by tall reeds, through which we had the greatest difficulty in forcing the punt, we came upon a colony of Eared Grebes (*Podiceps auritus*), the chief object of my search. There appears to be this singular difference between the Eared and the Crested or Lesser Grebes—that while the two latter, though abundant throughout the Lake, are not strictly gregarious, the former builds in societies more densely crowded than any rookery. It is also later in its nidification; for, of nearly fifty nests I examined, not one was incubated, though most contained their full allowance of four or five eggs. The nests, formed like those of other Grebes, were raised on artificial islets, frequently almost touching each other, and sometimes piled on stout foundations rising from more than a yard under water. The eggs are a trifle smaller than those of *P. sclavonicus*, which appear to do duty for them in many collections. We shot several of the birds, which, of course, were in very fine plumage, but we were not a little puzzled by the sudden disappearance of several which had fallen dead within twenty yards of us. At length, on pushing out in our punt into the open water, I detected the Water-Tortoises carrying off at great speed our wounded and dead birds, and, following the streak of blood through the water, at length seized one struggling with his captor, who maintained so tenacious a grasp that I hauled him on board along with the bird, and took care to secure him too for my collection. With this proof of the carnivorous propensities of the Water-Tortoise, I am inclined to believe that the havoc in the nests of Coots and Ducks may often be attributed to this plunderer. Nor are the Water-Tortoise and the Purple Gallinule the only 'oophagi' against whom these poor birds have to combat in the struggle for perpetuating their species. A Water-Snake frequently takes up his abode in a Coot's nest and boldly drives off the rightful proprietor. An empty nest seems to be his favourite dwelling-place; and

if a Coot's or Water-hen's nest be not tenanted by its owner, it usually supplies free quarters to a Water-Snake." (Ibis, vol. ii. p. 159.)

Thus it will be seen that Northern Africa is the great stronghold of this species. It also occurs in Asia Minor, the Caucasus, Oriental Russia, Siberia, and China, as proved by its being enumerated in Mr. Swinhoe's 'List of the Birds of Amoy.' The reader will now be able to form his own judgment as to the countries this bird frequents. In England and Ireland its visits are uncertain, though not unfrequent. In its winter dress it very much resembles the Slavonian Grebe; but it may at all times be distinguished from that bird by its more diminutive size, and by the upward curvature of the bill. In their summer dress they are so very different that a glance at the two Plates on which they are represented will be sufficient to show that they are quite distinct.

Mr. Gatcombe, of Plymouth, to whom I am indebted for many interesting notes respecting our native birds, informs me that he has killed immature birds near that town, and, many years since, an old male in full summer plumage. I find also among my MSS. a note from Mr. Robert Rising, of Yarmouth in Norfolk. This note was kindly placed at my disposal by Mr. Leadbeater. It relates to a very fine adult example in full dress which had been sent to him to be mounted, near the end of August 1863, and is as follows:—"The Grebe was killed on Horsey Mere, on the 6th of May last, with two others, and a fourth on the day following. These birds (two males and two females) had been seen continually on the mere through the winter and up to the very time they were shot, and would most likely have been killed long before, had they not been luckily mistaken for Dabchicks. I much regret I did not give instructions for the reeds and shores round the mere to be well searched after the birds were killed, as I can scarcely resist the conviction that they had already nested there, as the water had become so entirely their habitat during all this time."

Mr. Stevenson, of Norwich, states that "the habits of this species appear to be almost exactly the reverse of the Slavonian, being frequently obtained in its summer plumage during April and May, but rarely met with in its winter dress; indeed a single bird shot at Lynn, in November 1857, is the only record, in my notes for the last twelve years, of its appearance at the latter season. Messrs. Gurney and Fisher, writing in 1846, observe, 'In the month of April last no less than five specimens of the Eared Grebe were killed within a week at Wroxham and other places in the county; and it is somewhat remarkable that these have all proved, upon dissection, to be male birds.' A fine specimen, in full breeding-plumage, was shot at Sutton in April 1849; and in the 'Zoologist' for 1851 (pp. 3116, 3175) I find two notices of Eared Grebes, from the neighbourhood of Yarmouth, being purchased in the London markets. The first, killed on the 14th of April of that year, was sent up to London with some Crested Grebes; and a fine male and female, shot on the 17th, were purchased by a London dealer, who also received another pair in May 1852 from the same locality; and the females in both instances contained eggs, about the size of small marbles. In 1854, about the 18th of May, a very beautiful specimen was killed at either Burgh or Filby, which is now in the collection of the Rev. C. Lucas. In 1861 a pair, assuming summer plumage, were shot at Kimberley, the seat of Lord Wodehouse, on the 30th of March, and on the 24th of April of the same year a perfect example at Martham, and one in half change on Hickling Broad. The following summer, however, was even more remarkable for the number of these birds obtained in full summer plumage. One of these females is said to have contained a quantity of eggs; and there is little doubt, from their late appearance on our broads in summer, that this Grebe, like the Slavonian, would occasionally remain to breed if undisturbed; but unfortunately, though little observed in the sombre garb of winter, the very brilliancy of their nuptial plumage ensures instant persecution."

In summer the adult male has the head and neck black; from behind the eye, spreading over the ear-coverts, a triangular patch of silky light-chestnut-coloured feathers; all the upper surface and wings dark brown; the secondaries white, but scarcely perceptible when the wing is closed; breast and under surface shining silvery white; flanks chestnut; bill black; irides and eyelash red; legs dark green externally, lighter within.

In winter the crown of the head is dark brown, the other parts of the head and chin pure white; back of the neck and upper surface dark brown.

The Plate represents a male and a female of the size of life. The plant is the Flowering Rush (*Butomus umbellatus*).

Gould, John. 1873. "Eared Grebe, *Podiceps nigricollis* [Pl. 41]." *The birds of Great Britain* 5, -. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.324085>.

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