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WINTER MORTALITY AMONG RED-NECKED GREBES  
(*Colymbus grisegena*) IN ONTARIO

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DURING LATE FEBRUARY and early March 1963, many reports came into the offices of the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests and the Ontario Humane Society stating that Red-necked Grebes, *Colymbus grisegena*, had been found stranded, either dead or alive, in unlikely places on land. Because it was suspected that further information could be obtained, an inquiry was launched, the results of which will be discussed.

The Red-necked Grebe was considered a bird of the Prairies, but during recent decades it has shown a tendency to extend its summer range into the Great Lakes area. It has been found nesting near Burlington at the western end of Lake Ontario since 1943 (Speirs *et al.*, 1944), and in the Cochrane District in northern Ontario since 1955 (Snyder, 1957).

This species has been found wintering on Lake Ontario near Toronto, near Niagara Falls, on Lake Erie near Ashtabula, Ohio, and on Lake Michigan (Bent, 1919). Snyder (1929) reported that a specimen was sent in to the Royal Ontario Museum on January 16, 1929, which was picked up from a local marsh near Kingston, Ontario. In another paper (Snyder, 1930) he reported that on December 12, 1929, during a heavy sleet storm many grebes had landed on Toronto streets. By mid-afternoon of the thirteenth, twenty-seven live birds had been picked up. By December 15 a total of thirty-seven had been reported for Toronto. One other specimen was reported to have been captured at Brantford, Ontario. Not all birds passing through the Toronto area were stranded, as indicated by several individuals observed along the waterfront on December 14.

Forbush (1925) stated that the species is seldom seen in the interior of southern New England, except when severe cold waves freeze up the Great Lakes or other large lakes westward in which, in ordinary seasons, many of the birds pass the winter. According to him, in trying to escape to open water, many grebes become fatigued and fall or alight on the snow or ice in New England, eastern New York and New Jersey.

Todd (1940) states on pages 35 and 36 "in the winter it prefers the sea coast but sometimes remains on the Great Lakes". He adds, "there are February records for this grebe from Erie, Warren, Clinton, Armstrong and Washington Counties. If not pertaining to birds that were actually wintering where they were found, these records must indicate a considerable wandering

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at certain times from a presumed winter habitat elsewhere, probably Lake Erie. This explanation is suggested by the fact that Mr. Simpson has on several occasions found this grebe at Warren early in February during blizzards. Some were picked up in an exhausted condition, due apparently to lack of food."

Janet C. Green obtained several reports of Red-necked Grebes wintering at the extreme western end of Lake Superior near Duluth, Minnesota:

1 bird on Nov. 1, 1961 (The Flicker, 33(4): 114, 1961)

1 bird on Feb. 19, 1962 (The Flicker, 34(1): 22, 1962)

1 bird on Dec. 6, 1962 (The Flicker, 34(4): 114, 1962)

1 bird on Jan. 5, 1963 (The Flicker, 35(1): 15, 1963)

1 bird on Jan. 15, 1963 (The Flicker, 35(1): 15, 1963)

S. D. Robbins (*in* letter dated March 14, 1963) stated that there are no winter records for Wisconsin, but that little winter work has been done along the Lake Superior shore of Wisconsin. His latest date for the state is November 16, 1951 at Milwaukee. Probably the specimen seen on March 5, 1962 at Madison (Audubon Field Notes 16(3): 331, 1962) was a very early arrival. W. Nickell (*in* letter dated March 7, 1963) reported that there were no winter records for Lake Michigan.

Records about observations of grebes in Ontario during the winter were obtained from the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests (courtesy Mr. R. E. Mason), the Ontario Humane Society (courtesy Mr. T. I. Hughes), and The Ontario Naturalist (1(2): 33, 1963 (Table 1). In addition to data contained in Table 1, "numbers" were found in snow drifts in the Paisley-Wingham area (Ontario Naturalist, 1963).

An analysis of data covering winter 1962-63 suggests that the largest number of grebes was displaced during the second half of the month of February. It also suggests that the majority of these displaced birds were found in a relatively restricted section of the peninsula of southern Ontario, namely Bruce, Grey, Simcoe, Huron and Wellington Counties. It should be stated here that personnel of the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests could not obtain any records in reply to our questionnaire from area west and east of those referred to in Table 1. As will be noticed, the majority of the grebes were alive when found. The bird found in early March on the shore of Inverhuron Park was perhaps netted. Most grebes were found on roads or road shoulders. Perhaps roads bare of snow have a special attraction for displaced grebes.

What may cause large numbers of grebes to become stranded on land during the winter? The most obvious answer that comes to mind is certain weather conditions.

The winter of 1962-63 was unusually severe, which resulted in all of the Great Lakes, except Lake Ontario, becoming completely covered with ice or nearly so. Data supplied by the Meteorological Branch, Department of Transport, Canada, indicated that on February 15 Lake Erie had only relatively small stretches of open water, while only very little open water could be found at the south ends of Lakes Huron and St. Clair. On Lake Superior there was almost no open water on February 12. These records were taken



TABLE 1. — Records obtained of stranded Red-necked Grebes

Date	Location	No.	Dead	Alive	Source
Dec. 13, 62	Blanchard Twp.	1	X		L & F
Jan. 6, 63	Cobourg	1		X	O.N.
Feb. 6, 63	W. Luther Twp., Wellington Co.	1		X	L & F
Feb. 14, 63	Fort William	1	X		A. E. Allin
Feb. 16, 63	Harriston	1		X	L & F
Feb. 20, 63	Howick Twp., Huron Co.	1		X	L & F
Feb. 20, 63	Guelph	1		X	O.H.S.
Feb. 21, 63	Barrie	3		X	O.H.S.
Feb. 22, 63	Southampton				L & F
Feb. 23, 63	Kincardine Twp., Bruce Co.	1		X	L & F
Feb. 23, 63	Huntsville	1		X	O.N.
Feb. 26, 63	Allendale	1		X	O.H.S.
Feb. 28, 63	Collingwood	1		X	O.H.S.
Feb. 28, 63	Stroud	1		X	O.H.S.
Feb. , 63	Glengarry Co., 14 mi. N of St. Lawrence	1	X		O.H.S.
Feb. , 63	Blanchard Twp.	1	X		L & F
Feb. , 63	Downie Twp.	1	X		L & F
Feb. , 63	Ellice Twp.	1	X		L & F
Mar. 2, 63	Port Elgin	1		X	L & F
Mar. 5, 63	Rostock, Ellice Twp.	1	X		L & F
Mar. (early)	On shore of Inverhuron Park	1	X		L & F
Mar. 18, 63	Guelph	1		X	O.H.S.
Mar. 23, 63	Huron Twp., Bruce Co.	3		X	L & F

*Note:* February 17-23: Twelve telephone calls were investigated by Conservation Officer G. R. Harris about grebes along sides of roads in Bruce County. Several grebes were also found in the Wingham area. Six more calls were investigated since then.

No reports were received from the Clinton, Meaford, Lions Head and Paris area.

L & F = Ontario Department of Lands & Forests records

O.H.S. = Ontario Humane Society records

O.N. = The Ontario Naturalist (1), 1963.

during the period when most casualties were observed among the grebes. Nevertheless, there was some open water. Would it be plausible that the grebes were displaced by drifting ice or were moving from one lake to the next and unable to find open water? The problem is not adequately solved by this report, but further documentation might clarify the situation.

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