

F O C U S

The Grebes

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OF THE SIX SPECIES of grebes that occur in the coastal, western states (there are only 20 species worldwide), two sets of two each may present problems in identification. Horned and Eared have always been difficult in winter, and recently the taxonomic split through Western Grebe into Clark's and Western has created an even more challenging project for birders. The *other* two should be easy: Pied-billed Grebe is unique; Red-necked Grebe, a visual and evolutionary link between the "big ones" and the "small ones," cannot be confused with either group.

The Big Ones

Historical Taxonomy. Although "light" and "dark" Western Grebes were well known to some museum and field ornithologists for decades, they were assumed to be mere color phases (or "morphs," short for morphologically different) of a single species. Because the Fifth Edition of the American Ornithologists' Union (AOU) Checklist in 1957, which was excellent since it included sub-species and their distribution, did not even mention *clarkii*, some of us felt it was probably a case similar to that of the Lesser Snow Goose, where "blue" and "white" birds could come from the same clutch of eggs. As adults, though, the two morphs would tend to select their same color for mates when the choice was available.

The Sixth Edition of the AOU Checklist in 1983, which could not deal with sub-species because of its huge geographical range (now including Mexico), mentions "two color 'morphs' with light-phase birds becoming more scarce in northern populations. A high degree of assortative mating has been revealed in recent field studies . . . suggesting that further research may reveal the two forms to represent distinct species. . . ." By that time, birders were hot on the subject, and identification articles began to appear in newsletters and periodicals.

Further research was conducted, and in the 35th supplement to the AOU Checklist, published in *The Auk* (102: July 1985), the birds were declared separate species. It was a hard call, and once again the word "species" shows elasticity in its definition.

Identification. Western and Clark's grebes look very much alike, but in summer (alternate) plumage they are easily separable. Simply said, the Western is over all darker and

has a greenish-yellow bill whose base, culmen (top edge), and gonys (bottom edge) are dark. The eye is contained entirely within the dark part of the face. The dorsal black neck stripe is wider than in Clark's, and the sides of the bird above the water line are darker.

Clark's is over all paler, with a bright orange-yellow or orange bill which, except for a narrow, dark culmen, is largely unmarked. The eye of Clark's in summer (and in some individuals throughout the winter) is clearly in the white part of the face. The dark dorsal neck stripe is narrower than in Western, and the sides of the bird at the water line are lighter.

Now that all seems easy and straightforward, right? But there is a wee problem. After some confusion (such as finding a large number of orange-billed birds with the eye-in-the-dark in winter), it is now believed that many Clark's molt in November and December into a basic plumage that includes the extension of black feathers from the crown down to at least mid-eyeball. If this is true — and it does seem so — then the former primary field mark no longer works! This revelation leaves the bill color and size (it seems larger in most *clarkii*) as the very best single feature throughout the year.

So what have we got? If the eye is in the white part of the face, the bird should also have an orangey, large-looking bill (in part an illusion because of its bright clean color), a narrow black dorsal stripe down the neck from

the small black crown, grayer (less black) back feathers, and whitish sides near the water line. The lores — the areas between the eyes and the base of the upper mandible — should be white like the rest of the face below the crown. This is a classic summer Clark's Grebe.

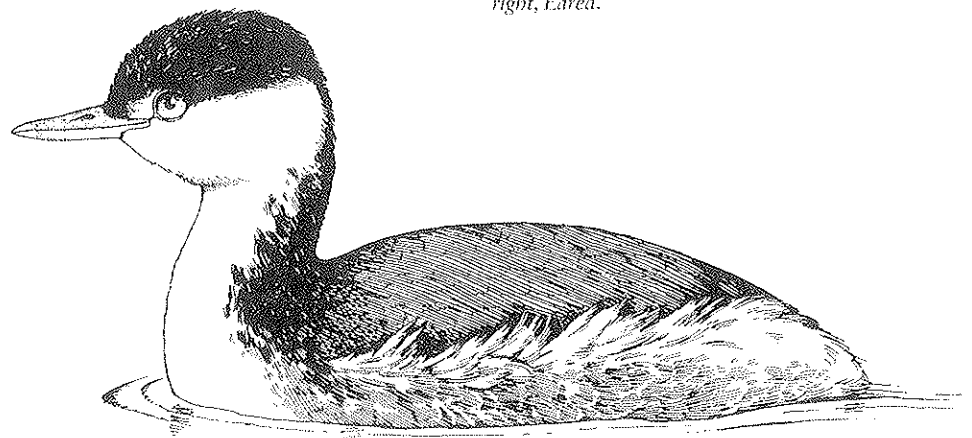
If the eye is in the dark part of the face, the bill looks thin and is greenish-yellow with dark borders, the stripe from the crown down the back of the neck is broad, the back is blackish, and the sides of the bird near the water line are mostly dark, you have a classic Western Grebe. The lores of this bird have a gray or whitish patch, usually triangular, that is unlike the blackness of the rest of the face.

Proceed carefully, now. If the eye is in the dark part of the face and the bill looks orangey and unmarked, the bird may be a Clark's in winter plumage or an intergrade between two parent types. Check the lores, dorsal neck, and sides. If they are *all* Clark's, call it one. There are troublesome individuals, though, and the careful observer will have to leave some birds unidentified. Just wish them smooth water and many fish; walk away.

Distribution. Both species are truly western (U.S.) in range. Both nest on freshwater lakes, ones undisturbed by humans and dogs, that have plentiful fish and emergent vegetation to build their platform nests. Where they nest sympatrically, which is common, mixed pairs have been observed, but uncommonly.

Westerns are far more widespread than Clark's, homesteading spots in most western states and west-central Canada as far north as north-central Alberta. Most winter along the Pacific seacoast from southern British Columbia to the tip of Baja California and inside the Sea of Cortez. Some, probably breeders from

The small grebes in winter: left, Horned; right, Eared.





central Canada, winter on the western Gulf of Mexico and at Lake Balmorhea in west Texas.

Clark's are more rare and breed more to the southwest, barely entering Canada. Like Westerns, they winter along the west coast but are rare from central California north. Contrary to field guide maps, they do not winter on the Gulf Coast of Texas, and there is (or was in 1984) but a single record for that state — at Lake Balmorhea, way out west.

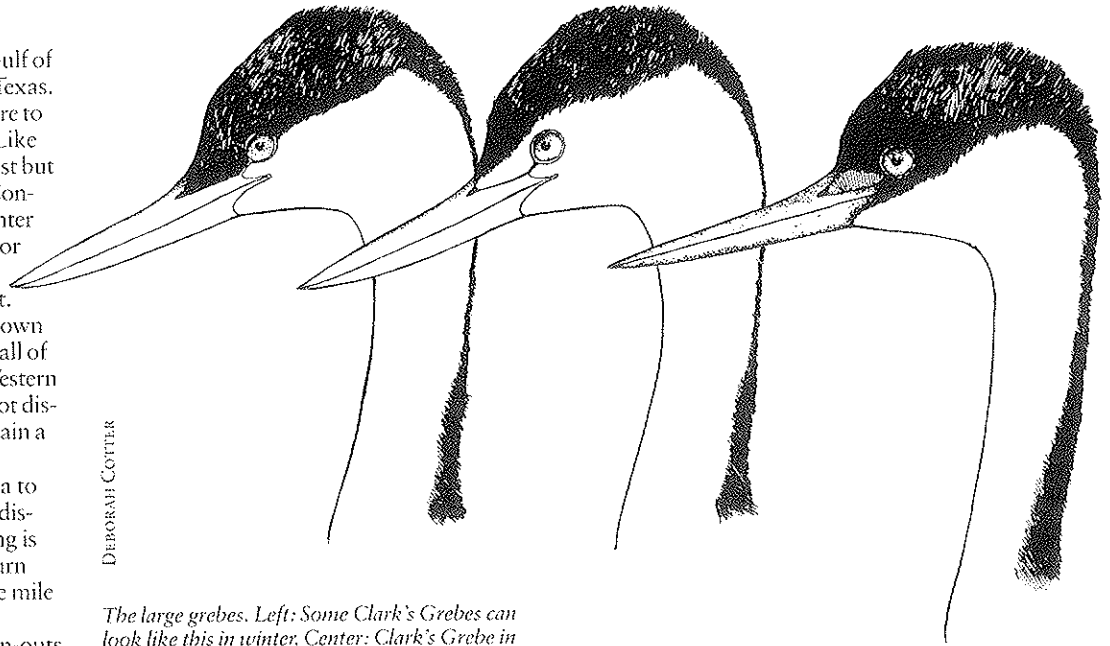
Lost individuals have, over time, shown up in almost every state, and most if not all of those extra-limits have proven to be Western Grebes. In cases where the morph was not distinguished, the species involved will remain a question.

A good place in northern California to watch both kinds doing their awesome display ballet in April-May and later nesting is Bridgeport Lake. From Highway 395 turn east on 182 at Bridgeport. Go about one mile until you see the end of the small plane airstrip. Stop at one of the two large turn-outs on the left, and use your scope. There may be 125 pairs of Westerns and six pairs of Clark's within your view.

The Small Ones

Identification. Very much the same size, Horned (Slavonian, in Europe) and Eared (Black-necked) grebes in winter differ consistently in several subtle feather patterns and, more substantially, in shape and structure.

Horned is stockier, has a thick straight bill, flat crown, and short thick neck. Its rear end *usually* appears low; the back slopes into the water. Eared is a bit spier, has a nar-



DEBORAH COTTLER

The large grebes. Left: Some Clark's Grebes can look like this in winter. Center: Clark's Grebe in summer. Right: Western Grebe always.

rower bill that looks upturned due to an angle on the gonys, a very steep forehead with a high point on the crown above or forward of the eye, a thinner neck, and its rear end is *usually* high and squared off. Sometimes the small tips of the folded primaries extend beyond the end of the back.

Also in winter, Horned has a sharper pattern of contrasts than does Eared. The crown and hindneck are black with a crisp definition against the white cheek and neck. Most Horned Grebes also have a white or gray spot in the black lores about the same

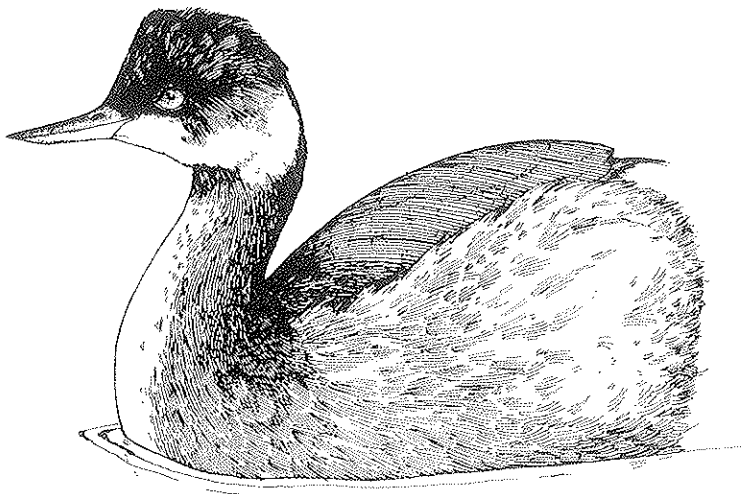
size as the eye, and the eye itself is bigger and closer to the gape than Eared's. Bill color is variable, but the Horned's often has a blackish or bluish hue with a pale, horn-colored tip. The Eared's bill is mostly dark, including the tip. The Horned has a larger nostril, triangular rather than oval, that sits farther out on the bill than does the Eared's.

Though Eared always has some immaculate feathering on the throat and upper sides of the neck, bits of its dark crown feathering spill variously through its cheeks and down its neck. It simply is darker, and the lores are black as is the rest of the crown.

Horned Grebes are less gregarious than Eareds and are seldom found hanging out together unless there is an occasion like a feeding frenzy. Eareds are more often found in tight flocks, though single birds are the usual case.

Habitat. On the winter range, both species are very common along the coast on salt or brackish water. In the far west, Eareds are also common winterers at many inland lakes, but Horneds are very rare anywhere away from the coast.

TEST YOUR SKILL. — and the above features — on Western/Clark's and Horned/Eared grebes in the distance. Please let us know if you discover other identification clues. For the grebes, that is the large and small of it.



DEBORAH COTTLER