

# First Record of Clark's Grebe in Maine and New England

*Peter D. Vickery and Derek J. Lovitch*

On March 2, 2005, Kirk Gentalen, formerly from California but now a Maine resident, was riding the Vinalhaven Ferry on his daily commute to work, when he spotted a bird with a long, thin neck, large head, long, thin bill, and short, low-riding body — an *Aechmophorus* grebe, which he initially identified and reported as a Western Grebe (*A. occidentalis*).

For the next three weeks, a number of birders were able to visit nearby Owl's Head Light State Park in Owl's Head, Knox County, and observe the bird from shore, usually 300–600 + yards offshore. Several observers noted the brightness of the bill, a character that seemed inconsistent with Western Grebe. On March 12, Vickery observed and digiscoped the grebe with an Olympus C-4000 through a Swarovski telescope. Although the bird was 300-500 yards offshore, the photos clearly showed a bird with a very bright yellow-orange bill, white face, and gray flanks, and Vickery suggested that these features cast doubt on the identity of this individual as a Western Grebe (Figure 1). This image was not adjusted in any way.



**Figure 1.** Photograph of Clark's Grebe off Owl's Head Light, Owl's Head, Maine, March 12, 2005. Even at distances of 300–500 yards, the bright orange-yellow bill and pale flanks were clearly visible. Photo by Vickery.

Three days later (March 15), Vickery returned with Derek and Jeannette Lovitch. The three observed the bird sleeping in typical grebe fashion for over two hours; it lifted its head for no more than thirty seconds during this period. The bird did eventually wake up and preen, but it soon drifted out of view behind a cliff. Shortly thereafter, the Lovitchs relocated the grebe within 100 yards of shore, on the east side of Owl's Head, and digiscoped the grebe using a Nikon Coolpix 995 held up to a Leica Televid 77 APO scope (Figure 2). This image was taken at approximately 4:00 p.m. in deep shade. Because the image was so dark, we used Adobe Photoshop Elements 3.0 to automatically adjust the contrast, lighten shadows, and improve sharpness. We did not adjust color.

On March 18, Vickery, Denny Abbott, Davis Finch, and others had an excellent opportunity to study the grebe closely in full sunlight and calm seas, and noted the following details, in accord with the observations and photographs of March 15.

The bill was a light, very bright orange-yellow with a dark culmen that was visible in the field for perhaps 60 percent of its length. On several occasions the grebe



**Figure 2.** Photograph of Clark's Grebe off Owl's Head Light, Owl's Head, Maine, March 15, 2005. The grebe was photographed approximately 100 yards offshore in deep shade. Despite the poor light conditions, the bright bill, dark culmen, black crown, white supraloral area, and smudgy grayish flanks were all apparent. Photo by D. Lovitch.

tilted its bill upwards, exposing the under side. The lower mandible was entirely bright orange-yellow, and the base (inner third) of the bill was a brilliant, intense "Day Glow" or "Mineola" orange, much brighter than the rest of the bill.

The supraloral area (*sensu* Sibley 2000) was crisply white, extending to the bill. The separation between these white supraloral feathers and the black crown feathers was sharp; there was no smudgy dark area before or around the eyes. It appeared that this white supraloral feathering might meet over the bill, but the blackish crown feathers extended to the bill in a neat thin dark line. The dark lores extended to the base of the upper mandible in a thin line. White feathering nearly surrounded the bright red eye, but

black crown feathers touched the top of the eye (Figure 2). The side of the face was white. The black on the nape was narrow, such that when the bird was facing away, white was simultaneously apparent on both sides of the neck.

The black crown and hind-neck were darker than the mantle. The flanks, which were smudgy, dingy white to light gray, contrasted with the dark gray back.

During the course of the observations on March 18, the grebe flapped several times, which allowed Vickery et al. to note the white inner primaries, which formed a large white panel on the wing. The legs were dingy "pea soup" green.


The bird was last reported on March 22, 2005.

Contemporary field guides (National Geographic Society 1999, Sibley 2000) separate Clark's Grebe from Western Grebe on the basis of bill color (bright yellow to orange-yellow for Clark's Grebe, dull yellowish to olive green for Western Grebe) and whether the eye resides in black or white feathering; generally white for Clark's Grebe. Sibley (2000, p. 29) notes that Clark's Grebe has "extensive white flight feathers," and "averages more white on flanks and grayer back." Storer and Nuechterlein (1985) provide the only detailed published study of which we are aware. They (1985, p. 105) examined 186 *Aechmophorus* grebe specimens and used bill color as the primary way to separate these two forms: "We separated the specimens into light and dark phases using bill color, which does not change with season. The bills of dark-phase birds have a layer of melanin that is diffused throughout the insides of both the upper and lower rhamphothecae [mandible]. This gives the bill the dull yellow-green appearance in life, rather than the bright orange-yellow of light-phase birds. The melanin of the bills of light-phased birds is largely restricted to a

narrow strip along the dorsal part of the upper rhamphotheca [mandible]...This dark strip contrasts sharply with the rest of the bill.” (Brackets by PDV and DL).

In addition to bill color, Storer and Nuechterlein (1985) concluded that the degree of white around the eye could also be used to distinguish Clark’s and Western grebes in the breeding season. They noted, however, that the border separating black and white feathers “frequently intersected the eye on nonbreeding adults. Such intermediacy was especially common for light-phase birds” (p. 109). They (p. 104) defined six gradations of light to dark-faced birds, and we think the Owl’s Head grebe was clearly within the range of Clark’s Grebe (category 5). Clark’s Grebes generally had whiter flight feathers and paler flanks than Western Grebes, although they found considerable overlap in these plumage features.

To conclude, bill color and all discernible plumage features on the Owl’s Head grebe were consistent with Clark’s Grebe but did not match Western Grebe. According to Storer and Nuechterlein (1985), the bright bill color is sufficient to distinguish these two forms, but we think facial pattern and all other plumage features further demonstrate that the Owl’s Head individual was a Clark’s Grebe.

This bird provided the first Maine and New England record, and the third East Coast record for Clark’s Grebe. Sporadic sightings of a single bird for five consecutive winters between February 11, 2000, and January 1, 2005, from the Virginia Beach/Fort Story area at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, probably involve the same individual (Rottenborn and Brinkley, in press). Another record from Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, March 15, 2003, may possibly involve the same individual (Ilf, 2003). These three sightings suggest that observers in the East should not assume every *Aechmophorus* grebe is a Western Grebe. Although Western Grebe is rare but regular on the Atlantic coast, it is now clear that Clark’s Grebe should also be considered. 

## References

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**Editor’s Note:** Since *Bird Observer* appears in black and white, the color details noted in this article are obviously not apparent. The pictures can be viewed in full color at <[http://www.yarmouthbirds.com/clarks\\_grebe.asp](http://www.yarmouthbirds.com/clarks_grebe.asp)>.

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## **REFORMS TO THE MASSACHUSETTS ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT**

Regulatory Reforms Effective July 1, 2005

Massachusetts Environmental Affairs Secretary Ellen Roy Herzfelder announced today that reform to the state's endangered species regulations — a top priority of the Romney administration — will be in place on July 1, 2005 when a comprehensive set of regulatory improvements take effect. This is the first major revision of the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act regulations since they were first published in 1992.

The state's Endangered Species Act was passed in 1990 to provide legal protection for the state's vulnerable biological diversity. The law is administered by the Division of Fisheries & Wildlife (DFW) and currently protects 448 rare and endangered plant and animal species native to the Commonwealth.... Within the DFW, the regulations are implemented by the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program (NHESP).

“The protections for rare plants, animals, and their habitats under the Massachusetts Endangered Species Act are vital to ensure that the Commonwealth's natural heritage is sustained for future generations,” said Christopher Hardy, Mass Audubon's Director of Legislative Affairs. “We are proud to have worked closely with the Division of Fisheries & Wildlife, the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties, and other stakeholders to craft a package of regulatory reforms and environmental review fees that make permitting procedures clearer and more predictable, while ensuring that Massachusetts continues to provide a strong safety net for our most vulnerable species.”

The remaining phase of this reform effort is the completion of revisions to the habitat maps that trigger the MA Endangered Species Act regulations. The statewide coverage of all delineated habitat areas that contain endangered species known as “Priority Habitats” are currently being revised and new maps will be completed by June 30, 2006. Partial interim map revisions have been made and are available on MassGIS at <http://www.mass.gov/mgis/> as NHESP Priority Habitats of Rare Species, July 2005. By mid-July, MassGIS will have available a web-based viewer with this new coverage. More information about the new regulatory changes can be found at: <http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/nhesp/nhesp.htm>.