

GENERAL NOTES

Dry-Land Nest-Site of a Western Grebe Colony.—The Western Grebe (*Aechmophorus occidentalis*) is said invariably to build floating nests located in extensive areas of bullrush (*Scirpus*) or cattails (*Typha*). Recent observations made at Old Wives Lake in southern Saskatchewan show that this species can adapt itself to nesting on dry land.

On August 8, 1956 we travelled to Old Wives Lake, which is located 30 miles southwest of Moose Jaw, and landed on the island known as Isle of Bays. This island is about one and three-quarter miles long and one mile wide and covers about 500 acres. There is a rocky promontory on the south end and sand beaches nearly all the way around the edge.

A great surprise to us was the discovery of a dozen Western Grebes swimming in a small pond (about 60 feet long and 30 feet wide) on the north end of the island, some 30 feet back from the edge of the west beach. We quickly surrounded the pond in order to obtain photographs of the group, some of which escaped overland. It was a strange sight to see these immaculate birds swimming and diving in the dark green, syrupy water of the stagnant pond. A dead brood of ducks floating on the surface of the pond and a dozen or more dead adults nearby—Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*), Pintails (*Anas acuta*), and a Black Duck (*Anas rubripes*)—were additional evidence of the stagnant condition. Several Western Grebe nests, some with eggs, in and on the edge of the pond were coated with dried mud, which suggested that the water level had recently been higher. A few cattails on the edge of the pond represented the total "marsh" habitat available.

Young grebes were observed on the backs of two adults that were swimming in the pond, their downy heads and necks protruding from between the wings. When the adults were finally permitted to leave the pond they clambered up on land, momentarily spreading their wings as if for balance, and unexpectedly dropping a few other young which had been concealed beneath their wings. Once underway, the adult birds ran rapidly and on the tips of their toes, in a fairly erect position, without using their wings (Plate 15). Their ability to negotiate the 30-foot stretch of sand astonished all of us.

Previous observations (made chiefly at the London Zoological Gardens) on the walking ability of four species of Old World grebes, and the Western Grebe, have been reported by F. Finn (Journ. Asiatic Soc. Bengal. 66:725-730, 1897). He comments that a Western Grebe was "able to advance only a few steps at a time—waddling along a little way, and then flopping down on its breast." A seemingly greater ability to walk was evinced by other species.

(On October 10, 1956 a Western Grebe found sitting on a lawn in Regina and in apparent good health, but unable to take flight, was released by Lahrman about 30 yards from the shore of a nearby lake on an almost level area covered by short grass. The bird at once headed for the water by pushing along on its belly, kicking with its feet, and bracing its wings against the ground. It repeatedly attempted to stand up but each time immediately fell down. According to Lahrman it showed no evidence of an ability to walk upright. It finally reached the water and then swam rapidly and dove in a normal fashion. It shortly commenced preening. Four Western Grebes captured and released under similar circumstances in previous years behaved in the same manner. However, in the fall of 1957 one grebe stood up and flapping its wings ran all the way to the water.)

About 48 nests were found in and about the pond. An area of some 100 feet by

50 feet to the east of the pond, and separated from it by a heavy stand of rose bushes some two to three feet high and covering an area about 20 feet wide, was also found to be a nesting site (Plate 16). Forty-eight nests contained one to three eggs but a few had one or two more. Approximately 120 nests, most of which still held eggs, were found here. These nests were located as far as 50 feet from the edge of the lake. A six-foot stretch of sand beach was vacant, except at one point where shrubs grew to the edge of the water. One nest in this spot was only three feet from the edge of the lake. Nests were constructed of immediately available materials—grass, in the high areas (Plate 16), and sticks, feathers, etc., in the beach area. All of the nest material had evidently been gathered and placed at the nest-site while in a dry condition. Three nests on the beach contained, in addition to one or more eggs, a number of small stones (Plate 17). This probably represents a habit acquired by the Western Grebe while nesting in the present situation. Stones have been found in the nests of other species nesting in similar habitat, e.g., certain gulls and terns. No young were found in this area; presumably, the large flock of grebes which we observed swimming offshore were carrying any young that they might have had.

A return visit to the island was made on the next day in an attempt to secure movie footage of the grebes running overland. We again made an attempt to surround the grebes on the pond, but this time all except one, which dashed across the beach, escaped by walking and running out along heavily-worn trails among the roses at the east end, travelling some 40 feet to the edge of the water. A very strong west wind seemed to be the deterrent to escaping over the beach. The single bird which did go out this way used its wings while running.

It seems apparent that the Western Grebes in this area have adopted a dry land nesting site as a result of changing conditions. In previous years extensive bullrush beds off the lake shore have harbored large colonies of Western Grebes. As a result of high water during the past few years, this emergent aquatic vegetation has not been available. On June 11, 1953, approximately one thousand pairs of Western Grebes were observed by Bard and Lahrman nesting along the flooded shore of the island at two places. Nests in the vicinity of the location described in this report were at that time anchored in clumps of small rose and willow bushes which were standing in shallow water. Windrows of waterweeds, lodged among the bushes, shut off pools which were favored by the grebes. In succeeding years the water level rose even higher and these bushes eventually disappeared.

In July, 1953, according to R. A. McCabe (pers. comm.), he and W. Leitch found 64 active grebe nests in shallow water and inland on the island, evidently in the same locality.

We visited the island again in 1957 and found grebes nesting under similar conditions. On June 6 we found approximately 250 nests located in about the same area but mainly beneath the extensive clumps of rose bushes. These nests each held from one to five eggs. Again, nests consisted of only a small amount of material, chiefly dry grass, twigs and feathers evidently gathered in the vicinity of the nest. Nests were found in four groups, three on the north shore and a fourth, the largest group with more than 100 nests, on the west shore about 100 feet from the others. The grass near the nests was heavily trampled, giving evidence of considerable activity. Nesting Common Terns (*Sterna hirundo*) completely surrounded one group; the others were bordered by Ring-billed Gulls (*Larus delawarensis*). Nests of both terns and gulls were found within two feet



DRY LAND COLONY, OF WESTERN GREBES AT OLD WIVES LAKE, SASKATCHEWAN, AUGUST 8, 1956. *Above:* DRY LAND NEST-SITE. *Below:* DRY LAND NESTS. *Photos* by F. W. Lahrman.

of grebe nests and some gull nests were actually located between grebe nests. Nearly all of the grebe nests were more than 18 feet from the edge of the water; several were 75 feet away. No young were seen on this date. After some time we retired to a considerable distance and later watched the grebes return to their nests. We found that they walked readily, even standing erect momentarily (Plate 17). Throughout the day they frequently left the nest without apparent provocation, standing up and slowly walking across the bare sand and gravel beach.

Although the grebes had adapted to a dry-land nesting-site, they were nesting under some difficulty. Frequently, when they walked across the beach they were struck down by Common Terns, and at every uprising of the gull colony—and this occurred often—the grebes left their nests. They suffered in other respects too, the feet of captured grebes being dry, cracked and scaly, presumably as a result of continued exposure to the hot dry air and from walking across the sand and gravel beach.

Return visits to the island for purposes of a behavior study of this species were made on June 13-June 22, June 26-July 4, and July 19-July 20. Nesting occurred throughout June but by July 19 had ceased except for desultory breeding behavior. Only a few young were observed during this period (one or two only on June 13 and June 19) and it is believed that nesting success was extremely low. It seems questionable whether this grebe colony can long survive under this condition, but there are indications of a regrowth of natural aquatic vegetation and in the future they may return to nesting in more normal habitat.—ROBERT W. NERO, FRED W. LAHRMAN, AND FRED G. BARD, *Saskatchewan Museum of Natural History, Regina, Saskatchewan.*

The Lesser Black-backed Gull in the New York City Area.—A Lesser Black-backed Gull of the British race, *Larus fuscus graellsii*, was collected by the author on a garbage dump near Rutherford, New Jersey, on Feb. 9, 1958. The bird (AMNH #468815), an adult female in winter plumage, weighed 825 gms. and measured: exposed culmen 49 mm, wing (flat) 410 mm, tarsus 53 mm, tail 56 mm, and ovary 15 x 6 mm; the orbital ring was bright red-orange, and the legs were yellow. The subspecific identification of the specimen was confirmed by Eugene Eisenmann. This is the first specimen of this species for New Jersey and the third for North America, the previous specimens, also identified as *graellsii*, being taken at Assateague Is., Maryland, Oct. 7, 1948 by J. H. Buckalew (Auk, 67: 251, 1950), and at Buffalo, New York, March 14, 1949 by R. F. Andrie (Buffalo Society of Natural Sciences #4084).

Sight reports of the Lesser Black-back, first noted in the United States at Beach Haven, New Jersey by C. A. Urner and J. L. Edwards on September 9, 1934 (Auk, 52: 85, 1935), have become more frequent in the New York City region in recent years (Cruickshank, "Birds Around New York City," p. 225, 1942), with several sight reports each winter, and one as late as March 29, 1945 (Alexander, Auk, 63: 258, 1946). Most reports of the bird have been at garbage dumps or near sewer outlets, in association with Herring Gulls (*Larus argentatus*). Both currently recognized subspecies of the Lesser Black-backed Gull (*fuscus* and *graellsii*) have been reported on the basis of sight observations, but subspecific field identifications cannot be considered reliable because light conditions may alter the apparent shade of the mantle. In fact, as Griscom (Bull. Mass. Aud. Soc., 28: 181-191, 1944) points out, even sight records of the species are open to considerable question due to the possibility of confusion with other dark-backed gulls. However, the prob-