

CLARK'S GREBE IN WESTERN WASHINGTON

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Until 1985, when the two taxa were formally split by the American Ornithologists' Union (1985), Clark's Grebe (*Aechmophorus clarkii*) was long considered conspecific with the Western Grebe (*A. occidentalis*). As field identification of Clark's and Western Grebes can be difficult, the status and distribution of these species, particularly the less numerous Clark's, is still being worked out (cf. Marshall et al. 2003). To understand this species' occurrence in western Washington better, I reviewed records of Clark's Grebe submitted to *WOSNews*, a publication of the Washington Ornithological Society, from July 1993 (when field notes were first published in *WOSNews*) through February 2004.

There are two subspecies of Clark's Grebe. *Aechmophorus c. clarkii* is a permanent resident in central Mexico with a population under 1000 (Delaney and Scott 2002), whereas *A. c. transitionalis* nests in the United States and Canada with a population of 10,000 to 20,000 breeding birds (Jehl 2001). North of Mexico, Clark's Grebes breed primarily from southernmost Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba south and west to Colorado, Utah, Nevada, and southern California (Sibley 2003). In the Pacific Northwest, a few have nested in southeastern British Columbia (Campbell et al. 2001), Washington has several established nesting colonies in Grant County on the state's east side (Smith et al. 1997), and Clark's Grebe breeds widely in eastern Oregon (Marshall et al. 2003). Since 1998 it has also bred in small numbers in western Oregon at Fern Ridge Reservoir, Lane County (Marshall et al. 2003). Two mixed pairings of Western and Clark's Grebes are known from Washington and Oregon. An adult Clark's and an adult Western were tending young at Fern Ridge Reservoir 17 July 1991 (Tweitt and Johnson 1992), and another mixed pair with intermediate-appearing young were at Potholes Reservoir, Grant County, Washington, 25 July 2003 (D. Schonewald pers. comm.).

Clark's Grebes winter primarily in California (mostly from San Francisco Bay south), southern Nevada, westernmost Arizona, southeastern New Mexico, westernmost Texas, and Baja California (Small 1994, Sibley 2003). Small numbers are found annually during winter along the Oregon coast, mostly in the southernmost counties (Marshall et al. 2003).

From July 1993 through February 2004, 96 Clark's Grebes were recorded in Washington west of the Cascade Mountains. All 67 western Washington records, excluding one anomalous record of 20 birds, discussed separately, fall between 4 September and 16 May and involve one to three birds. Peak occurrence is from mid-October to mid-December, with this period accounting for almost 60% of records. After mid-December, the rate of reports is steady through mid-May, with no apparent spring movement. By contrast, in eastern Washington fall migration occurs mostly from mid-August to late October, with a few birds lingering into December and no records later in the winter; spring migration is from early or mid-April into late May (Wahl et al. 2005). Consequently, most of western Washington's Clark's Grebes appear after this species has evacuated the eastern part of the state. Also, apparent hybrids were reported on at least three occasions from western Washington during the study period.

The anomalous record excluded, all but 15 of western Washington's Clark's Grebes have been found on salt water. Of these 15, nine were on freshwater lakes (predominantly Vancouver Lake, Clark County, and large lakes near Seattle) and six were along the Columbia River in Skamania and Clark counties. Most Clark's Grebes have been found in the company of Western Grebes, and there seems to be no difference in

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habitat preference between the two (pers. obs.). The total number of Clark's Grebes per year has varied from four (1999) to eleven (1998 and 2000).

Most of western Washington's Clark's Grebe records are from three areas: the Puget Trough, the outer coast, and the Columbia River and adjacent areas. This reflects habitat availability and, likely, observer concentration. Counties with more than five Clark's Grebes recorded include Clark (5), Grays Harbor (12), Island (10), Snohomish (8), Kitsap (8), Pierce (7), Skamania (6), and King (6).

During 2001, two Clark's Grebes were found on Vancouver Lake on 8 June, and this number grew to 20 by 20 June, but none was seen thereafter. Notably, this observation coincided with an irruption of several other species breeding mainly in interior North America (e.g., American White Pelican, White-faced Ibis, Black-necked Stilt, Wilson's Phalarope, and Black Tern) into western Washington and Oregon (Mlodinow and Tweit 2001).

In summary, reports to *WOSNews* revealed that Clark's Grebe is rare but annual in western Washington, occurring mostly as a fall migrant in marine habitats, with a few birds remaining to winter and a few birds appearing on large freshwater lakes and the Columbia River. It is likely that some spring records pertain to northbound migrants, but there is no clear peak during that season. Summer strays, perhaps driven by drought or other conditions poor for breeding, occur infrequently, but further occasional sightings of Clark's Grebes among summering flocks of Westerns can be expected.

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