

Encounter between Bald Eagles and a Horned Grebe

Ed Poropat

On 7 February 2014, Minden residents Joan Grant and Norm Thomas had a noteworthy experience involving a pair of Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) and a very fortunate Horned Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*). The incident occurred about 4.7 km NNE of the village of Minden, near the north end of Minden Lake (44.962342° N, 78.693530° W).

During the late afternoon, Mr. Thomas looked out his back window to check on his dogs when he saw a dark object fall from the sky and land in his backyard. He looked up and saw an adult Bald Eagle circling the yard at a height of approximately 20 m. A second adult Bald Eagle sat perched in a tall elm tree at the edge of the yard, approximately 30 m from the house. After bringing his dogs inside, he returned to the window and observed both eagles circling over the yard. They circled three times before flying off. At that point, his partner Joan Grant, who is a local veterinarian, arrived home. As he relayed his story about the

eagles, they noticed a dark head bobbing up and down in the snow where the object had fallen. At that point, they realized that there was a bird out there in the snow and that it was still alive!

Ms. Grant donned a pair of snowshoes and grabbed a blanket to check on the bird. There was a fresh layer of snow of approximately 10-15 cm blanketing a deeper, packed layer beneath of another 50+ cm. By the time Ms. Grant arrived at the location of the bird, it had made its way onto the surface of the snow and was awkwardly trying to escape. She noted that the bird had defecated where it had fallen and that there were traces of blood in the snow. As she approached the bird, she noted it was loon-like in shape, and recognized it as some type of grebe. The bird turned toward her, in defense, opened its bill squealing loudly, and spread its wings upon approach. She threw the blanket over the grebe and brought it to the house where she did a quick assessment to check for broken



Figure 1: Horned Grebe found on driveway at Shuyler's Island, Horseshoe Lake, Haliburton County on 27 January 2014. Photo: Jon James

limbs. After confirming that the bird seemed fine, she began thinking about releasing the bird back to open water. Ms. Grant identified the bird as a probable Horned Grebe.

With dusk quickly approaching, she took the grebe to an area of open water, at the outflow of Horseshoe Lake, approximately 1 km NE of her home. With the help of a neighbour, she took the bird down near the water's edge, opened the blanket, and released it into the open water where it quickly joined up with a flock of Mallards (*Anas platyrhynchos*).

The grebe flapped its wings, appeared healthy and dove several times before darkness finally fell.

By 11 February 2014, I had received several forwarded emails about this amazing encounter and drove to Horseshoe Lake after work to verify the sighting. The Horned Grebe was no longer present at the release site, but a Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*) in basic plumage was observed there instead. Since any grebe species would be very rare in Haliburton County at this time of year, the author presumed the bird in question

With such a harsh, cold winter, there was very little open water anywhere in the county, so waterfowl of any sort would be considered rare.

had simply been misidentified and was actually a Red-necked Grebe. Also, no other grebes had been reported in the area within the month (eBird 2014). Ms. Grant was then asked to ascertain if any pictures were taken by her neighbour during the release in order to verify with certainty the species of grebe. Although no photos were taken, another interesting story surfaced instead.

On 27 January 2014, Dave Godward, a resident of Shuyler's Island on Horseshoe Lake, found and photographed a Horned Grebe in his driveway (Fig. 1) This location is about 3 kilometers NNE from the release site and about 2 kilometers away from the closest open water. He reported that the bird seemed unhurt but couldn't fly. He brought the bird indoors and tried to feed it but it expired four or five days later, a full week before the eagle encounter. When Ms. Grant saw the photos of this grebe, she felt it was the same species as the one she found in her yard.

With such a harsh, cold winter, there was very little open water anywhere in the county, so waterfowl of any sort would be considered rare. The fact that there were a possible 3 different grebes present within a 2 week period in mid-winter is itself quite extraordinary. Both Red-necked Grebes and Horned Grebes are rare species in Haliburton County, especially in the winter. They are fairly regular migrants in the fall but are rarely

observed past the middle of December. As mentioned previously, this has been a particularly frigid winter, causing huge portions of the Great Lakes to freeze. There is speculation that this freezing has encouraged some birds to move inland to areas of permanent open water, such as moving rivers. This winter, Red-necked Grebes have been reported in several locations in central Ontario including Washago, Coboconk, Bobcaygeon, Peterborough, and Orillia (eBird 2014). Horned Grebes have not been reported nearly as often in central Ontario, preferring the expansive waters of Lake Ontario to winter on. The only records in February are from Peterborough, Orillia, and Barrie (eBird 2014).

Bald Eagles are becoming more common every year in Haliburton County, especially during the winter. Eleven were reported on the Minden Christmas Bird Count on 14 December 2013 (National Audubon Society 2014). They are frequent visitors to the local landfills, and

Bald Eagles are largely scavengers, but are capable of hunting down ducks, geese and other waterbirds, usually by employing a combination of stoop-and-pursuit (Dunne 2006). They have been recorded preying on grebes including both Horned and Red-necked Grebes (Knight *et al.* 1990).

appear to have lots of scavenging possibilities, especially with the healthy deer populations. As expected, they are most often observed near open water. The area below the Minden Wild Water Preserve, at the north end of Minden Lake, remains open even in the coldest of winters because of the strong current. It is likely that these eagles were hunting in this area and managed to flush and grab the grebe or to snag it from the surface of the water. From here, it would be a flight of about 500 m to the yard where they dropped the bird. It is not known why the grebe was dropped or why the eagles did not return to gather their prey, although the dogs in the yard may have played a role. No information on Bald Eagles dropping live prey could be found (Buehler 2000).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Norm Thomas and Joan Grant for their information and assistance in writing this note. Also, thanks to Chris Risley for assisting with a literature search regarding eagles and prey.

Literature Cited

Buehler, D.A. 2000. Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). The Birds of North America online (A. Poole, Editor). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Available at <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/506doi:10.2173/bna.506>

Dunne, P. 2006. Pete Dunne's Essential Field Guide Companion. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York.

eBird. 2014. eBird: An online database of bird distribution and abundance [web application]. eBird, Ithaca, New York. Available: <http://www.ebird.org>. (Accessed: March 2014).

Knight, R. L., P. J. Randolph, G. T. Allen, L. S. Young, and R. T. Wigen. 1990. Diets of nesting Bald Eagles, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, in western Washington. Can. Field-Nat. 104:545-551.

National Audubon Society. 2014. Christmas Bird Count current results. Available: <http://birds.audubon.org/data-research> (Accessed 13 March 2014)

Ed Poropat

71 Dean Ct, Box 1204
Haliburton, ON K0M 1S0
E-mail: ed.barb@sympatico.ca



Pelee Wings

NATURE STORE

636 Point Pelee Dr. Leamington ON N8H 3V4

Birding • Nature • Optics • Books

Canada's Largest Selection
of Binoculars and Scopes

KOWA 88mm SCOPES ON SALE

Swarovski

Kowa

Zeiss

Leica

Bushnell

Celestron

Minox

Vortex

Pentax

Nikon

Eagle



New Swarovski
ATX / STX Modular
Spotting Scopes

For **FAST** Mail Order Delivery or Quote...

519-326-5193 sales@peleewings.ca

www.peleewings.ca