

# SEASON OF THE WATER WITCH



JOHN WILLIAMS

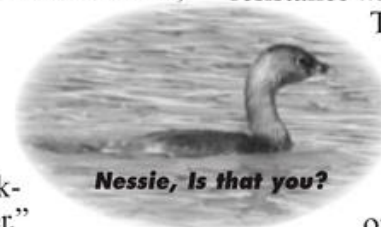
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A dark, tapered head breaks through the water's surface, scanning for signs of danger like a miniature periscope. Curiosity piqued, I watch as a shadowy, long-necked figure surfaces and glides, its body held low in the rippling water. I am reminded of that famous photo of the Loch Ness Monster, the dark silhouette, long curvy neck, and barely visible back. Nessie, is that you? Gee, I thought you'd be bigger!

A yapping dog breaks the silence, and the mysterious figure sinks—yes, sinks—out of sight, leaving only its dark, glittering eyes and pointed bill above water. It is this unusual, almost comical, method of self-preservation that has earned this small water bird such nefarious nicknames as “helldiver,” “devil-diver,” and “water witch.”

Catchy nicknames or no, some people might dismiss the unostentatious, common pied-billed grebe as lackluster. But give a grebe a chance! For one thing, grebes are unparalleled skulkers. Grebes have the ability to compress their feathers, squeezing out pockets of trapped air. This allows them to sink beneath the water's surface

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and to remain partially or fully submerged, without the battle of buoyancy. French-speaking settlers of early America called the pied-billed grebe *sac-a-plomb*, meaning “sack of lead,” yet another fitting alias for this highly submersible bird.

Anatomically distinctive feet and legs also contribute to the grebe's exceptional diving abilities. Unlike web-footed ducks and

loons, grebes have lobed feet—or, more accurately, lobed toes.

In the water, lobed toes open during the down stroke and close on the up stroke, maximizing and minimizing resistance with model proficiency.

The pied-billed grebe has enormous feet in relation to its small body, and its legs are positioned far back on its body. This

rearward location of the legs is responsible for the scientific name *Podilymbus podiceps*, which roughly translates to “rump feet.” According to 19th-century British ornithologists, the early English colloquial name for the Podicipedidae (grebe) family was “arsefoot.”

These physiological peculiarities give the pied-billed

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**The pied-billed grebe is well named, at least during breeding season.**



grebe remarkable speed and agility underwater. But that which is so advantageous in the water becomes the grebe's downfall on land ... literally.

There's no denying it: Pied-billed grebes are quite awkward on land, so awkward that they cannot take flight without a reasonably long water runway. Incidents of stranded, injured, or even dead grebes along roadways and in parking lots are not uncommon, particularly during migration. Grebes migrate at night and can easily mistake dark paved areas for water. Once the unfortunate birds have landed, or more likely crash-landed, they are unable to take off again from land.

Despite limitations with liftoff, the pied-billed grebe is a strong flyer. Short but powerful wings can cover great distances during migration. The pied-bill's summer range covers almost all of North America. In winter, northern inhabitants will migrate as far south as necessary in search of ice-free water. Most pied-billed grebes in the southern United States and Mexico are year-round residents.

Here in Texas, the lone overwintering pied-billed grebe in my "backyard" pond spent nearly six months as the sole representative of its species. It skulked among numerous mallards and wigeons but always kept a polite distance.

Finally, on March 9, a second pied-billed grebe arrived. The couple wasted no time in commencing their courtship.

Pied-billed grebe courtship rituals, although not as elaborate as those of some other grebes, are still lively performances. The male draws attention to himself with a series of intermittent loud barks and soft coos. He shows off by splashing enthusiastically and diving under the water's surface. If the female is significantly impressed, she will show her approval by calling, singing, and swimming alongside her suitor.

Male and female pied-billed grebes look identical, although females can be slightly smaller. Both have silky gray-brown feathers on their heads and backs and downy white rumps. During breeding season, both sport black patches on their throats and a thick black stripe on their white bill. The contrasting black and white bill is what gives them their current common name, pied-billed grebe, "pied" meaning "of two or more colors, usually black and white," according to Webster's Dictionary.

Mated pairs of pied-billed grebes are outwardly affectionate, gently touching bill tips and caressing each other's feathers. They build their nests floating on the water's surface and anchor them securely to aquatic vegetation. Both parents help build



**From September through March, sack-of-lead or arse foot are more apt names for the pied-billed grebe.**

the nest and incubate the three to eight pale blue or green eggs that eventually become stained in brown. Likewise, both parents help care for the precocial chicks. Pied-billed grebe chicks are downy black with white striped heads and bright orange bills. Chicks can walk and swim almost immediately after hatching but spend most of their first few weeks riding on a parent's back. This is primarily to protect them from hungry marine predators such as snakes, snapping turtles, and even large fish.

Like their parents, grebe youngsters eat a varied diet of fish, insects, frogs, lizards, and crustaceans. The adults' stout, chickenlike bill makes short work of disassembling hard shells and bones. According to Bent's *Life Histories of Familiar North American Birds*, pied-billed grebes are

also known to eat their own feathers and to regurgitate them for their chicks. Likely, this is to help filter out small bones and other indigestible parts.

Though keen to avoid close encounters with humans, pied-billed grebes will inhabit urban areas as long as there's a large enough body of water and a steady supply of tasty aquatic creatures. This makes them ideal birds to watch, particularly for city-dwelling bird enthusiasts such as myself. But be careful! You, too, may find yourself spellbound by the enchanting ways of the water witch. ✍

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