



The Grebes: Podicipedidae

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Reviews



EDITED BY R. TODD ENGSTROM

The following critiques express the opinions of the individual evaluators regarding the strengths, weaknesses, and value of the books they review. As such, the appraisals are subjective assessments and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or any official policy of the American Ornithologists' Union.

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The Grebes: Podicipedidae.—Jon Fjeldså; illustrated by Jon Fjeldså. 2004. Oxford University Press, New York. xvii + 246 pp., 8 color plates, text illustrations, maps. ISBN 0-19-850064-5. Cloth, \$179.50.—Grebes are an intriguing group of waterbirds whose natural history seems to be replete with unique and strange behavior. In many grebe species, courtship consists of a spectacular series of stereotyped displays that are organized into elaborate sequences or ceremonies that have spurred much interest in the family. In the early 1900s, two British scientists, Edmund Selous and then Julian Huxley, wrote a series of scientific papers describing the courtship display sequences of the Great Crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*). These and the later studies by K.E.L. Simmons became classic works read by a wide audience of both amateur birdwatchers and scientists. In Great Britain, the Great Crested Grebe became a household name, and many credit these early papers with helping to launch the modern scientific study of avian display behavior.

John Fjeldså's new book is the first authoritative volume devoted to the biology, phylogeny, and conservation of the 22 recent species of grebes of the world and is part of the renowned *Bird Families of the World* series of Oxford University Press. I first met John Fjeldså by chance in southern Patagonia, Argentina, on the shores of a small lake where a newly discovered grebe species, the Hooded Grebe (*P. gallardoi*), happened to be located. As he approached across the barren landscape, introduced himself, and sat down beside me to watch the only known breeding population in the world, I quickly realized that we shared the same enthusiastic fascination with this group. But while I

sat laboriously taking notes and photographing the displays, he was able to take things one step further by adding to his notebook field sketches that portrayed what we were seeing.

In this book, we are treated to numerous such sketches that accurately illustrate many of the behavioral quirks of grebes, some of which are nearly impossible to capture on film. These line drawings are like hors d'oeuvres, lavishly served throughout the pages of the book to both enlighten and entertain us. For example, one sketch shows how grebes carry young on their back and feed them feathers taken from their flanks or breast. Another shows how the grebes' lobed feet travel in a nearly circular pattern when they dive underwater, with the toes folded and rotated to decrease water resistance on the backstroke. In the chapter on communication and behavior, courtship behavior sequences for several representative species are illustrated in stop-frame manner. There is an illustration showing how a Great Crested Grebe swallows a large fish head-first, and another showing how many smaller grebe species often sunbathe by raising their wings and back feathers to expose the underlying pigmented skin. Fjeldså's sketches allow us to see postures from viewpoints rarely seen in the field. For example, one illustration shows how a grebe resting on the water in "pork-pie attitude" ships one leg under a wing and tucks in its bill beside the neck, as viewed from directly above. No detail is spared. (Just in case you were wondering: apparently, it is most often the right foot that is shipped; the bill is then usually tucked in on the same side of the neck as the shipped leg.)

Fjeldså's skills as a scientific illustrator also enhance the anatomical figures that compare

bone, muscle, and feather structure. Finally, there is a series of color plates illustrating the breeding plumages, nonbreeding plumages, and unusual downy-young plumage patterns of all 22 species. These are the best illustrations of the group that I know of, which is a tribute both to his skills as an artist and his deep knowledge of the group. There are also several beautifully reproduced photographic color plates showing both the habitats of grebes and some of their extravagant courtship displays.

The book is divided into three parts. Part I consists of four general chapters that serve to introduce the family Podicipedidae to the reader, including a discussion of the physiological constraints on diving birds and how these relate to the morphology of grebes and other diving birds. Part II includes seven thematic chapters covering the biogeography, ecology, behavior, life history, and conservation of grebes. Part III begins with a chapter that reviews the taxonomy of grebes and presents a new phylogenetic analysis based on 80 morphological characters. This is followed by the 22 individual species accounts. These accounts include nomenclature, physical description, voice, geographic range, conservation status, habitat, feeding and general habits, courtship, and breeding behavior. Two appendices provide a description and matrix of the 80 character states used in the phylogenetic analysis.

The book includes a special illustrated chapter that compares the courtship displays of grebes. Grouping the illustrations of display sequences together into one chapter enables the reader to easily make comparisons between the displays of the various species. However, herein lies my only real complaint with the format of the book. Later, in the species accounts, most displays are not illustrated again or described except by name. This makes it difficult for readers unfamiliar with them to read the account of a species and easily visualize the displays without jumping back to that chapter to search for their illustrations. Because the comparative chapter is not meant to be comprehensive for all 22 species, it was difficult to know if an illustration existed. In the accounts, I also would have liked to see spectrograms included for at least the primary advertising or territorial calls of each species (rather than simply referring to sources that contain them), but that may only reflect my own bias toward bird vocalizations.

Fjelds  states that the book is intended to “provide the reader with a general overview of the results of research that has been done on grebes, and to direct him or her to the primary literature.” In this aim he has succeeded admirably. I can think of no other book that I would rather hand to a new graduate student wanting to work on grebes. Fjelds  makes a special attempt to bring to light some of the less-well-known regional studies and studies written in languages other than English, and he has managed to accurately reflect the salient conclusions of a remarkably diverse cross-section of the grebe literature. After reading his reference to an obscure 1954 article, I could not help but wonder if it might hold the key to answering a question I have long pondered. Why are grebes, among all the waterbirds, so difficult to maintain in captive environments? The critical problem reported always seems to be the same: wet feathers and loss of waterproofing. But why should captive grebes be especially prone to this problem? I still do not know the answer, but Fjelds  reviews at least two unusual characteristics of grebes that might relate to the question: (1) they have an unusual oil-gland secretion that is paraffin-based, and (2) their belly feathers have a unique coil of flattened and twisted barbules that wicks water into the outer portion of the feather. This is believed to reduce turbulent flow and drag when diving, but might this system also allow water to penetrate to the skin if water conditions in the pen are not just right?

Throughout the book, there is an emphasis on conservation, which is important because we have already tragically lost several members of this small family in the past 30 years. Besides loss of habitat, unregulated use of underwater gill nets for fishing emerges as a possible major mortality threat to grebes and other diving birds. Losses are hard to quantify, but Fjelds ’s literature review suggests that increased fatalities of adults may be putting the final nail in the coffin of many grebe populations found in countries where gill-netting is proliferating.

In sum, this book is an attractive volume that should prove an extremely valuable resource for any college or university library. The bibliography itself is a goldmine that includes many papers rarely cited elsewhere. *The Grebes* should also be on the shelf of any professional or amateur ornithologist contemplating work on grebes. Finally, the book should also be of

interest to birders who just want to know more about this unique and fascinating family of birds.—GARY L. NUECHTERLEIN, *Department of Biological Sciences, North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota 58105, USA. E-mail: gary.nuechterlein@ndsu.edu*

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The Birds of Morocco.—Michel Thévenot, Rae Vernon, and Patrick Bergier. 2003. BOU Checklist No. 20. British Ornithologists' Union and British Ornithologists' Club. The Natural History Museum, Tring, United Kingdom. xii + 594 pp., 16 tables, 5 text figures, 76 color plates. ISBN 0-907446-25-6. Cloth, £45.00.—Thanks to a great variety of bird habitats, Morocco has an avifauna of special interest to ornithologists and birdwatchers. Four hundred and fifty-two species are known to occur there, including Palearctic and Afrotropical residents and migrants that pass from Europe to sub-Saharan Africa and back. The Morocco avifauna has 19 endemic subspecies, 4 endemic Maghreb species, and 65 endemic Maghreb and Moroccan subspecies. Morocco also has large wintering populations of wildfowl and threatened species, including 60 breeding pairs (in 1999) of Northern Bald Ibis (*Geronticus eremita*), one of the world's last known breeding populations. The publication of *The Birds of Morocco* is a welcome event in Europe and Africa: it is the premiere source for what is known about the avifauna of this Maghreb nation up to the end of 1999, and undoubtedly will remain an important source for years to come.

Previously, one had to rely on several sources for information on Moroccan birds, including books such as H. Heim de Balsac and N. Mayaud's *Les Oiseaux du Nord-Ouest de l'Afrique* (1962), R. D. Etchécoper and F. Hüe's *Oiseaux du Nord de l'Afrique* (1964), and the earlier volumes of *The Birds of Africa*; scattered publications in the literature; unpublished private notebooks and reports provided by bird tours; and, since the late 1970s, annual reports by the three authors of

The Birds of Morocco. This book, along with *Birds of Algeria* by P. Isenmann and A. Moali (2000) and the soon-to-be-published *Birds of Tunisia* by P. Isenmann and his colleagues, will make the ornithology of northwestern Africa better known than it has ever been.

The design of this book is attractive, and the cover painting of Moussier's Redstart (*Phoenicurus moussieri*) by David Nurney is a special plus. The book follows the style of recent British Ornithologists' Union Checklists, with an Introduction, the Species Accounts, four Appendices, References, and Index. The Introduction has informative sections on the general history of Morocco, history of ornithology in Morocco, geology, climate, flora and vegetation, geographic divisions and habitats, breeding birds, migration and movements, endemism, biographical affinities of the Morocco avifauna, changes in status, and conservation. For one with little knowledge of French and Arabic or the geography of Morocco, Moroccan localities are often difficult to determine. The authors have helped the reader immensely by dividing Morocco into eleven divisions, each with several subdivisions. All are indicated on maps in the book's front matter and on the front and back inside covers. Each subdivision is assigned a number, and this number is listed for each locality in the gazetteer (Appendix 4)—a welcome feature when studying the ranges of birds in Morocco. The authors also have assisted the reader by listing the most important bird areas, including national parks and reserves, in the Introduction.

The bulk of the book is made up of the species accounts, which generally follow the sequence and nomenclature used by *The Birds of the Western Palearctic* (Cramp and Simmons 1977–1983; Cramp 1985–1992; Cramp and Perrins 1993, 1994) and *The Birds of the Western Palearctic: Concise Edition* (Snow and Perrins 1998). Each account gives an English name (most also give Spanish and French names) and has sections on status; breeding including range, habitat, and nesting dates; movements and migration; winter distribution; and ringing recoveries. The accounts are informative and well documented.

In the center of the book are 76 color plates, all outstanding. Plates 1 and 2 are maps of the geology and main bird habitats of Morocco, plates 3–54 are color photographs of the main

bird habitats, and plates 55–76 are color photographs of some of the characteristic birds.

Another feature of this book, its 16 tables, covers a variety of topics, from the status of migrating birds in Morocco, to past and present colonies of Northern Bald Ibises, to the 15 most commonly ringed species in Morocco from 1932 to 1985, to biographical affinities of its past and current breeding birds.

The first appendix summarizes the status of bird species in Morocco, including those that occur there now and those that formerly occurred but no longer do. Also included are species whose present or past occurrence in Morocco is uncertain. In addition, introduced species are listed, with comments indicating which ones have established populations. Appendix 2 lists species that have been omitted, detailing where they were reported and why they were not included. Appendix 3 has a section on the history of bird ringing in Morocco and a detailed list of recoveries of ringed birds. The fourth appendix is the gazetteer, listing all Moroccan localities and geographic features mentioned in the text. I was especially pleased to see that, as noted above, each entry's subdivision can be found on maps on the front and back inside covers of the book.

The references section includes the works cited in the text and all other significant works consulted. It is impressive, covering 65 pages. There are two indexes, one of scientific names and the other of English names. The back cover provides photographs and biographical information about the three authors—two from France, one of whom was born in Morocco; and a Welshman, Rae Vernon, who passed away on 9 March 2005.

In any work of this kind, one can find errors and omissions. For example, I wished that the list of figures and tables in the front of the book included page numbers. It would be helpful if the plate numbers for the photographs of birds were included in the species accounts, and the plate numbers for the photographs of bird habitats in the Introduction section on habitats. The species accounts would have benefited from more information on behavior and conservation. Despite the arrangement of the maps into subdivisions, each with its unique number, I still found some ranges in the species accounts difficult to follow. Maps would have helped, but undoubtedly would have made the book too

large and too expensive. Sometimes the English bird names given are no longer commonly used (e.g. Cormorant rather than Great Cormorant [*Phalacrocorax carbo*] and Bald Ibis rather than Northern Bald Ibis). There also is some unnecessary duplication: for example, "Geographical divisions and subdivisions" appears on page 13 in figure 5, on pages 38–39 in the text, and again on the front and back inside covers.

All in all, this is a first-rate book. As evidence of this, *The Birds of Morocco* was tied for fourth place in the British Birds–British Trust for Ornithology "Best Bird Book of the Year" award competition in 2004 (British Birds 98:144–146, March 2005). The authors are to be congratulated on a fine piece of work. Their book, a welcome addition to the ornithology of the African and Western Palearctic, belongs in university, school, museum, and personal libraries.—EMIL K. URBAN, *Department of Biology, Augusta State University, Augusta, Georgia 30904, USA. E-mail: eurban@aug.edu*

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and even our county or state. A case in point involves the closely related Golden-winged Warbler (*Vermivora chrysoptera*) and Blue-winged Warbler (*Vermivora pinus*). The males are shown in the atlas with their breeding distribution maps. When I was an active birder in the Boston suburbs in the 1930s, the Golden-winged Warbler was a common breeder and it was a treat to find a Blue-winged Warbler. The atlas map 40 years later (1974–1979) shows only five confirmed records statewide for the Golden-winged Warbler, compared with 73 for the Blue-winged Warbler, and the Golden-winged Warbler is now listed as endangered by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife. Nationally, it is a species of management concern.

After a foreword and acknowledgments, this atlas begins with five very brief introductory chapters: history of the project, Massachusetts breeding bird distribution, Massachusetts ecoregions, atlas methods and criteria, and an introduction to the maps and species accounts. Massachusetts was the first state to embark on a state-wide grid-based avian atlas project. The organizers followed the procedures established by *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland* (Sharrock 1976) and endorsed by the International Bird Census Committee. The standard block size in Europe is 10 × 10 km, but small countries are using a 5-km grid, and county atlases in Europe are using a 2-km (tetrad) grid. The Maryland Ornithological Society had conducted a pilot study in two counties using standard 7.5-minute U.S. Geological Survey topographic maps (Klimkiewicz and Solem 1978). When divided into six equal parts, each atlas block at that latitude was almost exactly the same size as the European 5-km block. Blocks are slightly smaller at the latitude of Massachusetts, but most eastern states, including Massachusetts, have found it convenient to use the same latitude-longitude sampling frame. Massachusetts organizers elected to include every 5-km block in the state, whereas neighboring Vermont and New Hampshire and later many other states have randomly or systematically sampled only one block per 7.5-minute quad for lack of sufficient personnel. Before initiating the statewide atlas fieldwork, workers had successfully surveyed six Massachusetts quadrangles in 1973 to test the atlas protocol. More than 600 observers participated in the six-year project.

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Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas.—Edited by Wayne R. Petersen and W. Roger Meservey. 2003. Massachusetts Audubon Society, Lincoln, Massachusetts. 441 pp., 225 watercolor paintings by John Sill and Barry Van Dusen, 198 range maps, 2 appendices. ISBN 1-55849-420-0. Cloth, \$60.—A glance at the dust jacket of this handsome volume drives home the conservation message that breeding bird atlases are designed to promote—that bird populations are changing over vast areas and, unless we become aware of changes in status and take remedial action, some species will disappear from our neighborhoods

The Distribution chapter discusses the arrival of new breeding species in the state during the past century and likens bird distribution to a series of polygons of different shapes and areas. Sixty-one percent of Massachusetts breeding bird species nest continentwide. A discussion of bird habitats refers the reader to regional references. Thirteen ecosystems are mapped and briefly described.

The Methods section shows a field card and lists the standard atlas codes. The Massachusetts maps use the accepted convention of three degrees of certainty of breeding: possible, probable, and confirmed. Overlays in the back pocket permit researchers to study bird distribution in relation to elevation, habitat, and climatic factors and to recognize individual spots on the map. I do not buy atlases for their bird pictures, but I must point out that Sill's and Van Dusen's gorgeous watercolor paintings of birds in their breeding habitats are outstanding. This is the fourth North American atlas to display the birds in full color. The maps, on a county background, are large and neat and easy to read.

The accompanying text, contributed by 90 authors, describes the nesting habits of each species and the winter range of those that go to the tropics. It is so neatly edited that it appears to have been written by a single author. The text is very readable, with a minimum of references, which are largely initials of authors or publications that are identified on page 23. Clutch sizes for Massachusetts nests were obtained from the nest record file at the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology.

Twenty species that were not confirmed during the six-year field period are discussed briefly in Appendix 1. Appendix 2 lists plant and animal species other than birds that are referred to in the text. A three-page bibliography precedes the index.

Massachusetts is well known for its many fine birding spots and its high density of knowledgeable bird enthusiasts. It may also be the state with the most state bird books. I now have six: Howe and Allen (1901), Forbush (1925–1929), Bailey (1955), Griscom and Snyder (1955), Veit and Petersen (1993), and Petersen and Meservey (2003). The Veit and Petersen book had already published small versions of most of the 1974–1979 atlas maps—those for which the distribution was believed to be unchanged since the fieldwork had been completed. However, the most dynamic maps, those showing active

change, have not previously been published. Breeding bird atlases for all the surrounding states were published between 1985 and 1994.

Although the atlas passed through half a dozen editorial processes over the years, no one noticed that all the percentages of possible, probable, and confirmed records were based on 1,116 blocks (186 quads × 6) instead of 969, the number of atlas blocks in Massachusetts. Many of the quads extend into surrounding states or over open water. So Song Sparrow (*Melospiza melodia*), for instance, had been found in 97% of the blocks surveyed rather than the 84% indicated, and the observers had done much better than they were given credit for. All the percentages in this book should be multiplied by 1.15 when making comparisons with coverage in other states and provinces. I was disappointed not to see any summary statements regarding what was learned from the atlas work. Readers will also notice the absence of quantitative data. There are no counts, estimates, or trends. But remember, this was the first atlas started, and it was not until the Ontario folks asked observers to estimate the number of individuals nesting in each 100 km² of territory that atlas organizers began to think quantitatively. Those interested in population levels or trends in Massachusetts birds can obtain this information from the Patuxent website: www.pwrc.usgs.gov/birds/.

This is one of the most handsome bird atlases ever published, and one of the most interesting distributionally because of Cape Cod and the offshore islands. Why is the Chipping Sparrow (*Spizella passerina*) widespread on Martha's Vineyard and all but absent from Nantucket, whereas the threatened Vesper Sparrow (*Poocetes gramineus*) was found in four blocks on Nantucket but was absent from the Vineyard? This book belongs in all academic libraries throughout the New World and in the personal collections of New England naturalists and conservationists.—CHANDLER S. ROBBINS, *Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, Maryland 20708, USA. E-mail: chan_robbins@usgs.gov*

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Tracking Ocean Wanderers: The Global Distribution of Albatrosses and Petrels.—BirdLife International, Cambridge, United Kingdom. 2004. xii + 100 pp., 68 color plates, 22 tables, 10 appendices. ISBN 0-946888-55-8. Paper. [Available free of charge from BirdLife Global Seabird Programme, RSPB, The Lodge, Sandy, Beds SG19 2DL, United Kingdom.]—When I became interested in birds, in the 1960s, the albatrosses and petrels belonged among the exotic and esoteric, accessible only through grainy black-and-white photographs in Murphy's *Oceanic Birds of South America*, Alexander's *Birds of the Ocean*, or trays of Rollo Beck's museum skins. How ironic that, by virtue of their large size, tameness, and dire conservation status, these birds have become among the most well-known on Earth. This book summarizes research using two types of instruments to track the travels of these birds: platform terminal transmitters (PTTs), which send a radio signal from bird to satellite, and geolocators, which record the time of sunrise and sunset at the bird's location. Platform terminal transmitters provide a "fix," good to within

about 30 km, of a bird's position roughly every hour, whereas geolocators provide one position per day, good to within about 180 km. The combined use of these two instruments enables the tracking of a single bird throughout a year (or, in theory, through a lifetime). This book shows how dramatically such information improves our knowledge of the biology and conservation status of this group of birds.

It is difficult to think of another technological innovation in biology that has so expanded the quantity of useful information—automated gene sequencers and "doubly labeled" water come to mind. The significance of being able to follow an organism wherever it goes on the surface of the Earth is broadly hinted at through the wealth of information provided here. The Results section is divided into subsections that cover distribution of breeding adults during the breeding season, distribution of nonbreeding adults and subadults during the breeding season, and distribution of all birds during the nonbreeding season. There are also "regional summaries" for each of the southern oceans plus the North Pacific, as well as "Discussion" and "Conclusions and Future Work" sections devoted to assessing overlap of albatross foraging and commercial fishing regions. Individual sections are written by about 45 authors, most of whom collected the original data on some of the 19 species covered.

Many fascinating findings are presented: albatross populations have at-sea distributions that change substantially over the course of the breeding season, the range shrinking after chicks hatch; nonbreeding adult Buller's Albatrosses (*Diomedea bulleri*) stick closer to the colony than breeders; in both species of giant-petrel (*Macronectes giganteus* and *M. halli*), males have very different at-sea distributions than females (the difference is as large as that between some different species); several species regularly traverse the entire South Pacific from western South America to New Zealand during the course of a year.

Certainly one of the most serious threats to Procellariiformes worldwide is mortality from longlining fishing trawlers: albatrosses and petrels attack the baited hooks as they go overboard, become hooked, and drown as the line is dragged underwater. This book presents at-sea distributions of albatrosses and petrels as determined from satellite-tracking data, superimposed on maps of longline fishing effort. Unsurprisingly, there is considerable overlap;

more importantly, this information provides a firm basis on which to build sound and (hopefully) effective conservation policy.

Given the stunning visual presentation of data in this book, it is easy to forget that there are other methods of collecting data on birds at sea—namely, using shipboard surveys. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses. The strengths of the various tracking methods are obvious from this book; their weaknesses are a very limited sample size compared to the size of the population being studied, restriction to birds large enough to carry the instruments (White-chinned Petrel [*Procellaria aequinoctialis*] and larger), and expense. The authors cite “lack of knowledge of the origin and status” (of birds seen from shipboard) and lack of “consistent and standard methods” used to collect such data as weaknesses of shipboard surveys. I feel that this view is a bit too dismissive and that more support should be given to combining data from both shipboard and tracking studies to maximize information content. Many important

topics (spatial association with prey, change in local abundance through time) cannot readily be addressed through tracking methods.

I have few criticisms of this excellent book. The “Annexes” are a bit brief and of questionable usefulness in places (e.g. a kernel is defined as “the shape placed over each observation”; I doubt that this definition will enlighten anyone not already thoroughly familiar with the technique), but a thorough literature cited section directs interested readers to the appropriate sources.

This book is indispensable to anyone with interests either in seabirds or in tackling global problems in conservation. Every institutional library should have it. In addition, the high quality of the numerous color maps and moderate cost should make this a strongly appealing “coffee table” book for anyone passionate about marine organisms and the world’s oceans.—RICHARD R. VEIT, *Biology Department, College of Staten Island–City University of New York, 2800 Victory Boulevard, Staten Island, New York 10314, USA. E-mail: veitrr2003@yahoo.com*