

DOCUMENTATION FORM
Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

Species: Red-necked Grebe

Location: Dale Maffitt Reservoir, Dallas Co., IA

Habitat: Open water on man-made reservoir; near weedy shoreline

Date(s): 3/11/90

Time: 4:34pm to 4:42pm

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Ave., Norwalk, Iowa 50211

Other observers: none

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under-tail, legs, feet). Also mention behavior and voice.

In scanning the reservoir for waterfowl, I noted a grebe-type bird close to the opposite shore and seeing a bit of white on the tail thought it might well be my first pied-billed grebe of the spring. After cranking the scope up to 30x, it was immediately apparent that this was not a pied-billed. I began studying the bird at 30-35x and dictated a description. About twenty minutes before I had been watching a horned grebe and this bird showed a striking similarity, but it was bigger with a large, straight, dagger-like, loon-type bill. Lighting and distance precluded seeing the bill color but it was lighter than the top of the head. The head had a dark brown to gray cap beginning about even with the bill which extended down the nape and across the back. A large, definite, white cheek began at the eyeline and curved around to include the chin. The neck was some darker and definitely contrasted with the cheek. It appeared to be changing color but was not totally filled in as in full alternate plumage. The flanks were a pale gray to white and the undertail was pretty white, leading to my initial conclusion that it was probably a pied-billed. The bird was preening and showed white underparts. One quick flap of the wings showed a large white patch on the trailing edge of the dark wing (secondaries) with a very slight white line on the leading edge. According to Master Guide, red-necked grebes "molt into breeding plumage by late March or April" and this one appeared to be well on its way. I drove to the opposite shore to try to get a closer look but was unable to relocate the bird.

Similar species and how eliminated:

Loons were eliminated because, although the neck was somewhat thick, it was longer than a loon. The head was also a bit flatter and it rode higher in the water, just giving a different posture than a loon. Plumage details did not fit any loon.
Western Grebe - Thicker neck, some color on neck and white cheek eliminated this one
Pied-billed Grebe - Size, bill shape, and other features wrong
Horned/Eared Grebes - Although it gave much the same appearance as a horned grebe, size and bill eliminated both.

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? NA

If yes, explain:

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Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:
The bird was observed through a scope at an estimated 1/4 - 1/3 mile (judged from county map) at 30-40x. The sky was overcast and in fact light rain began as I was searching for the bird on the west side of the park. The sky did not present any problem at lower powers, but when I zoomed to 40x to try to make out coloration better, the lack of light was more problematic.

Previous experience with species and similar ones:

Breeding plumaged birds have been observed in Canada.

References and persons consulted before writing description:

Description dictated during observation. National Geographic Society's, Field Guide to the Birds of North America, Harrison's Seabirds, Robbins, et. al. Birds of North America, Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds, and The Audubon Society's Master Guide to Birding were consulted prior to completion of this documentation

How long before field notes made? at time of observation How long before this form completed? 5 hours