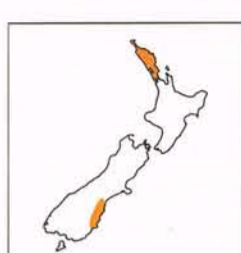


Freshwater diving birds with a distinctive silhouette – dumpy body, low to the water, with rounded rear end because of no visible tail; bill pointed; head held erect. Sexes alike. They feed underwater, propelled by special lobed feet. As their legs are set well back, they are awkward on land and seldom venture onto it. Patter across the water when disturbed or during displays, but can fly well at night. Gather in loose flocks in autumn and winter. Silent. Nests are bulky floating structures, often attached to emergent or overhanging vegetation. Lay 2–4 chalky white eggs, staining to brown; covered whenever the adult leaves the nest. Chicks are carried on an adult's back when very small. Young have striped heads, through to the age of independence.

AUSTRALASIAN LITTLE GREBE *Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*

Rare native

25 cm, 220 g. The smallest grebe in NZ. Breeding adult has black head with contrasting yellow eye, a yellow patch of skin between eye and bill, and broad band of rich chestnut on sides of neck. Non-breeding adult and immature lack head and neck colours, the skin patch becomes whitish and hard to see, but upperparts remain dark brown; pale cheeks and foreneck contrast with dark brown cap to level of eye. Dives frequently. Wary; when disturbed, dives and may lurk in vegetation, often with only its head above water. **Habitat:** Lakes and farm ponds. [Sp 7]



AUSTRALASIAN CRESTED GREBE



NEW ZEALAND DABCHICK



HOARY-HEADED GREBE



AUSTRALASIAN LITTLE GREBE



GREBES

Podicipedidae

20 species; 4 in New Zealand region, including 1 endemic.

An ancient group of diving birds, quite unrelated to the family Anatidae (swans, geese, ducks), grebes may have diverged early

vegetation. Their lobed toes (not webbed) propel and steer them underwater. Their tails are a vestigial tuft only, not a rudder. Their large feet are set well back, making them efficient swimmers but clumsy on land, which they avoid. Their small narrow wings are not used in swimming but are used for flight, mainly at night. In winter, many gather on large lakes or (seldom in New Zealand) in estuaries and harbours.

Sexes are alike, but males are larger than females on average and have longer bills. Fish-eating grebes have long, pointed bills, whereas invertebrate-eaters have short, stubby bills. Most, especially fish-eaters, swallow their own feathers, especially breast and flank feathers,

on from the lineage that gave rise to the penguins, petrels, pelicans and storks.

Grebes are aquatic specialists, usually living on clear, shallow freshwater lakes and ponds, particularly those with mud, clay or sand on the bottom and emergent or floating

which may help in the forming of pellets.

The nest is a mass of sodden waterweed and sticks, attached to submerged or emergent vegetation. The eggs, laid at intervals of about two days, are white but soon become stained brown. They are covered with vegetation when the bird leaves the nest. Young chicks often ride on their parents' backs. The chicks of almost all grebes have stripes on the head and neck, remnants of which remain for several months after they have become independent juveniles. After breeding, most grebes moult all their flight feathers at once and so are flightless for several weeks; presumably true of New Zealand grebes also.

7. AUSTRALASIAN LITTLE GREBE

Tachybaptus novaehollandiae Plate 2

Other name: Australasian Grebe
Size: 25 cm, 220 g
Geographical variation: Six subspecies confined to Australasia; the nominate subspecies *novaehollandiae* is in Australia, southern New Guinea and New Zealand.
Distribution: Widely distributed through Australasia from Java to New Caledonia and New Zealand. They are mainly found in southern Australia, including Tasmania. The

first New Zealand records were near Arrowtown (1968–69) and Dargaville (1972). In the North Island, Little Grebes have become established on sheltered reed-fringed small lakes, dune lakes and farm ponds from Cape Reinga to Lake Kereta, South Kaipara Head. They form small flocks of up to 20 birds in autumn, especially on the Aupouri Peninsula. A pair bred at Lake Rotoehu, Rotorua, in 2002. In the South Island, pairs or family parties were

seen until the mid-1980s on widely scattered lakes from Marlborough to Southland, but despite a promising start, breeding pairs have persisted only in coastal South Canterbury, and more recently at Farewell Spit.

Population: Over 100 birds in 2005, mainly in Northland and South Canterbury.

Conservation: Protected self-introduced native, maintaining a tenuous hold in New Zealand. Sometimes seen on the same lakes as Dabchicks, but it is not known if they compete.

Breeding: In New Zealand, young have been recorded in January–April. The nest is a floating pile of decomposing plant material, anchored to reeds, water lillies or willows. In Australia, they lay 2–4–5 eggs (36 x 25 mm), which both sexes incubate for c. 23 days.

Behaviour: Very wary and secretive when nesting. At the first hint of danger, they sink silently beneath the surface, leaving only the periscope of the head above the water. Usually silent but utter loud trills when courting.

Feeding: Diet in Australia is mostly small fish, snails and aquatic insects, which they catch mainly by diving, but they also swim on the surface with head and neck immersed and turned from side to side, or snatch from the surface or from plants. They swallow feathers deliberately.

Reading: Chance, G.R. 1969. *Notornis* 16: 3–4. Marchant, S. et al. 1989. *Aust Birds* 23: 2–6. Miller, P. 1973. *Notornis* 20: 272–275.