

THE PIED-BILLED GREBE

Lynda Stevens – Nature Nanaimo



For my first article on our feathered friends found in Nanaimo I would like to introduce you to one of my favourite birds at Buttertubs Marsh, the Pied-billed Grebe. This small, chunky swimming bird is a year-round resident at Buttertubs and although it swims and dives like a duck, it is not a duck and does not have webbed feet. Grebes are about 11-15 inches in length, weigh about a pound, and are tawny brown in colour with puffy whitish undertails. Males and females look alike and the plumage stays almost the same year-round. However, in the breeding season the short bluish white bill acquires a

dark black band. It is this “pied” bill which gives the grebe its name. At Buttertubs they are frequently seen resting among the pondweed or diving for food such as small fish, frogs, insects, crustaceans, and small quantities of aquatic vegetation. These grebes are rarely seen in flight and prefer to escape predators by diving or submerging themselves so that only the top half of the head is visible like a submarine periscope.

This summer, at Buttertubs, I enjoyed watching a pair of grebes as they nested and reared 6 chicks. The birds construct a nest made of decaying plant material which they pick up from the bottom of the pond. This floating nest is anchored to standing vegetation and the nest is situated so that it can be approached from under the water. Both parents take turns incubating the eggs and if



both are away from the nest they will cover the eggs with vegetation to hide them from predators. The eggs hatch after about 3 weeks and the young chicks can swim in a couple of days. At this stage the chicks are very small and their plumage colour provides excellent camouflage. I noticed that the chicks would stay close to the nest in the protection of one parent while the other parent would go for food.



When the food arrived, they would jump into the water and vocally demand to be fed. The parents would take turns on the nest and going for food and after about 10 days the chicks were often left alone at the nest while both parents went fishing. On several occasions I observed an interesting interaction between the parents as they came and left the nest. If they crossed paths they would call out a greeting to each other and then continue on their way.



The parents continued to bring food for about 3 weeks but as the chicks got larger they ventured farther from the nest and started diving on their own under the guidance of the parents.

By about 4 weeks they were almost full grown and identical in colouring to the parents except for white and brown streaks on the face. By 8-10 weeks the facial streaks are fading and they have most of their adult plumage.

Across their range a decline in the grebe population was noted between 1960 and 1990 due to loss of wetland habitat and the residual effects of DDT and other pesticides. Since pied-billed grebes rely on large wetlands with an even mixture of vegetation and open water wetland conservation and restoration efforts have helped to boost pied-billed grebe numbers in recent years.



In Nanaimo we are fortunate that Buttertubs Marsh provides these perfect conditions which allow the grebes to stay year-round and raise their families.

