

SECOND RECORD OF THE AUSTRALIAN LITTLE GREBE IN NEW ZEALAND

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ABSTRACT

A pair of Australian Little Grebes (*Podiceps novae-hollandiae*) was found inhabiting a farm pond near Dargaville in August 1972 and was still there in October 1972. The birds built a nest pad. The only previous New Zealand record is of a single male bird on a dam near Arrowtown in 1968. Descriptions and notes on behaviour are given with photographs of the birds in their swimming position.

INTRODUCTION

The Australian Little Grebe (*Podiceps novaehollandiae*) was first recorded in New Zealand by Chance (1969) based on the occurrence of a single male bird on a dam at Arrowtown in August 1968 (see also Soper 1972: 84-85, pl. 35). There have been no further sightings reported (OSNZ 1970: 18), but a pair has now been found inhabiting a farm pond near Dargaville in August 1972 and were still there in October 1972.

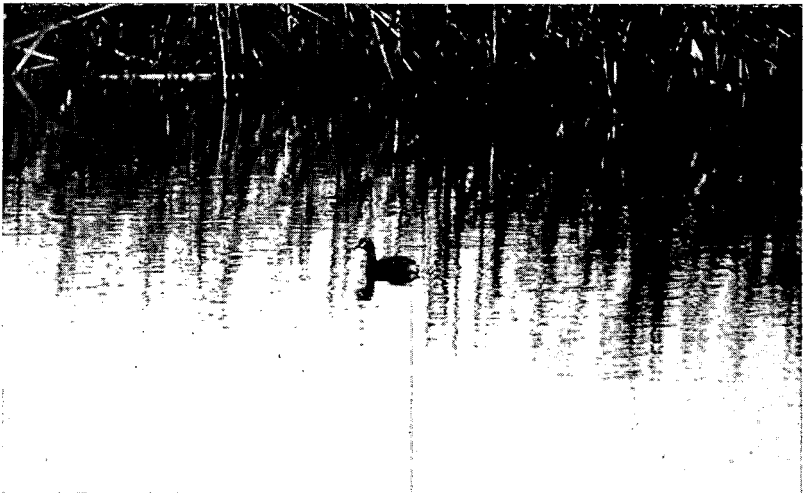


FIGURE 1 — Australian Little Grebe. Fast swimming position and habitat.

Photo: G. J. H. Moon



FIGURE 2: Australian Little Grebe. Normal swimming position. The pale bill tip can be clearly seen in this photo.

Photo: G. J. H. Moon

The two birds were seen on the pond in late August by L. Oakes but were then thought to be Dabchicks (*P. rufopectus*) and were not closely examined. They were seen again on 16 September 1972 by a Whangarei Beach Patrol Party and I identified one bird as an Australian Little Grebe. On 23 September 1972 I observed both birds closely for 2½ hours and further observations were made on 28 September 1972 by C. D. Clunie and A. T. Edgar, on 3 October 1972 by G. J. H. Moon who obtained a series of photographs, two of which are reproduced here (Figs 1-2), and at intervals throughout October by C. D. Clunie, Miss D. M. Whyte, W. J. Campbell and myself. Notes on the birds and their behaviour follow.

HABITAT

The pond is approximately 100 x 50 m in area and has a raupo fringe. It is said to be very deep in the centre and is believed to be fed by a spring. It has a seasonal water level fluctuation of approximately one metre.

DESCRIPTION

The birds were in breeding plumage. Head and neck dark grey; a chestnut patch on each side of the neck; back dark grey but not as dark as head and neck; rump light grey; breast streaky grey; flanks light rufous brown; belly white; underwing white; a yellow mark from base of bill to beneath the eye, but not touching the eye; bill black with a pale tip, sometimes difficult to see.

CALL

A long chitter uttered infrequently. ATE also heard a soft "whit whit."

BEHAVIOUR

Shyer and more skulking than Dabchicks; when disturbed on the open water they dived, resurfacing inside the raupo and remaining under cover for 10-20 minutes before reappearing. As long as observers did not move around they seemed less concerned and dived infrequently.

Occasionally they were seen to peck at the surface of the water, presumably collecting food. Movements appear more restrained and there is less head movement than in the Dabchick (GJHM). Much of the time they spent resting on the water, head down on shoulders and sometimes moving in tight circles. Head movement was greatest in the rest position. CDC noted that once while in this position the feet were raised so that they lay on the lower back of the bird. When swimming quickly they held their head and neck erect (Fig. 1), but normally the head was pulled in closer to the body (Fig. 2). When preening dislodged feathers were allowed to drift away and there was much head flicking, scattering drops of water. The birds rolled on one side to preen the belly and while doing so twisted around in circles.

On 23 September 1972 one bird stretched its neck along the surface of the water; the other bird swam around it, then adopted the same position directly behind it. After a short time both reverted to the normal swimming position and later rested on the water near the raupo fringe.

By 28 September 1972 a substantial pad of green material had been constructed at the base of the raupo stems. This pad was visited several times by one or both birds during the period of observation. The birds never swam openly to the nest but would dive some distance away and invariably resurface right at the site. If they approached the nest without diving they would enter the raupo some distance away. Once a cow walked into the edge of the pond just behind the nest pad. This alarmed the sitting bird which quickly pulled leaves from the edge of the pad over the nest and dived from it, all in a matter of seconds. On one occasion one bird climbed onto the pad and assumed what appeared to be an invitational posture, body flattened on the pad, neck extended and held below the level of the body and top of the pad. The other bird climbed up beside it and appeared to attempt coition (CDC). On 3 October 1972 one of the birds sometimes spent 4-5 minutes on the nest. Later in the month strong winds caused waves in the pond which slopped over the nest pad; subsequently the birds were seen taking the pad to pieces (CDC).

The Australian Little Grebe has since been seen on Lake Okareka, Rotorua, in January 1973 (see Lyle 1973, *Notornis* 20 (3), this issue).

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