

## LETTERS

The Editor,  
Sir,

### HISTORY OF DISCOVERY OF CRESTED GREBE

I have just read Dr Westerskov's interesting paper (*Notornis* 24 (3): 167-177) on the history of the discovery of the Crested Grebe in New Zealand and wish to make a few comments primarily in the interests of historical accuracy.

Quoting Potts (1869, *Trans. Proc. N.Z. Inst.* 2: 40-78; 1870) Dr Westerskov wrote (p. 170) that possibly the first definite field determination of Crested Grebes was made by him at Lake Selfe in April 1856. It is, however, clear from other writing by Potts (which admittedly is not well known) that he not only definitely saw Crested Grebe at Lake Selfe in April 1856 but that he also definitely saw the species at Lake Coleridge shortly before. In the *Canterbury Times* for 3, 10, 17 and 24 December 1886, Potts, writing under a pseudonym, described an expedition which he and two others made in April 1856 to the upper reaches of the Rakaia River. Although written 30 years after the events described, the article is nevertheless a very detailed one and clearly was based on a contemporaneous written record kept by Potts, perhaps on his diary part of which apparently still survives (Acland, *The Early Canterbury Runs*, 1975, p. 296). In the *Canterbury Times* report Potts recalled that at Lake Coleridge on 15 April 1856 "Waterfowl were abundant. Amongst the numerous flocks of ducks were some loons or grebe, swimming with an easy buoyant gracefulness, without the least apparent exertion, carrying their crested heads loftily." He further recalled that at Lake Selfe on 20 April 1856 "hundreds of waterfowl were swimming or disporting. Lanky (one of his companions) most unreasonably took a very long shot at a magnificent crested grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*)." It is also of interest that at Lake Selfe Potts saw "a few pairs of the red-breasted grebe (*P. rufipectus*)," the Dabchick.

Dr Westerskov reproduced as Figure 2 the illustration by Potts of a Crested Grebe and its nest which appeared in Potts (1869), saying that this was drawn probably at Lake Selfe. However, in the above quoted account Potts did not mention seeing nesting grebes at Lake Selfe and it seems extremely unlikely that eggs (which are clearly visible in the illustration as originally reproduced) would be present as late as April. It is much more likely that this illustration of nesting grebes with eggs is of the nesting grebes which Potts observed at Lake Coleridge in the spring of 1868 and which he refers to in the same 1869 article (p. 74) with which the illustration was originally reproduced.

Although Buller wrote in 1873 (*History of the Birds of New Zealand*, p. 354) and again in 1888 (Vol. 2, p. 284) that the specimen on which he founded his original description of *Podiceps hectori* was

in an imperfect condition, it is clear from the original 1865 description that he had more than one specimen before him at that time. According to Buller these specimens had been collected by Hector and were then in the Provincial Museum. Because he could find no trace of Hector's specimens in the Otago Museum, and because Buller in 1888 had said that his description of adult and young Crested Grebes was based on specimens in the Colonial Museum, Dr Westerskov explored (p. 172) the possibility of Hector's specimens being loaned or transferred to the National Museum. In fact Buller as early as 1869 (*Trans. Proc. N.Z. Inst.* 2: 388; 1870) had referred to specimens in the Colonial Museum as he did again in 1873 (p. 354). But there is nothing I can find in Buller's writings to indicate that any of Hector's Provincial Museum grebe specimens ever found their way to the Colonial Museum. However Dr Westerskov asserted (p. 173) that sometime between 1865 and 1875 Hector's grebe specimens or some of them must have been transferred from the Provincial Museum to the Colonial Museum. The only evidence adduced by Dr Westerskov in this regard is the fact that British Museum (Natural History) specimen No. 75.7.2.57 has a label which reads "*Podiceps cristatus* Crested Grebe/Colonial Museum, Wellington, Dr. Hector, Director." On the basis of this label Dr Westerskov stated that the specimen is "undoubtedly" one of Hector's Crested Grebes obtained in Otago but mentions in the very next paragraph that the specimen bears no date or place of collection. Furthermore the reference to "Dr. Hector, Director" on the label does not in fact prove that Hector himself collected the specimen. On the evidence given by Dr Westerskov all that can safely be said about the specimen is that it is an adult Crested Grebe which was in a collection of 81 specimens received by the British Museum (Natural History) from Dr Hector, Director of the Colonial Museum. It is my opinion that such evidence as is adduced by Dr Westerskov falls a long way short of satisfactorily establishing that the specimen in question was one of Hector's Otago specimens, let alone that it is or could be a type specimen. For all we know Hector's specimens (including the type/s) may still be among the unlabelled specimens which Dr Westerskov mentioned are in the Otago Museum.

It is surprising that Dr Westerskov was not able (p. 175) to more definitely identify A. von Hugel and the origin of American Museum no. 526625 attributed to him and said to have come from Lake Wakatipu in December 1874. Sir Robert Falla, who was acknowledged by Dr Westerskov as having critically read his manuscript and made helpful suggestions, himself referred to this von Hugel and some of his activities in New Zealand in his 1967 paper on the Auckland Islands Rail (*Nectaris* XIV: 107-113). Sir Robert there pointed out that von Hugel had arrived in Invercargill on 19 December 1874 and quoted a passage from von Hugel's letter to R. Bowdler Sharpe which was written from Christchurch on 11 February 1875 and published in *Ibis* 1875: 389-394. From this letter we learn among other things that von Hugel, shortly after his arrival in New Zealand, undertook an expedition to Lake Te Anau where he collected a number of Kakapo specimens, some at least of which are now in the Rothschild collection in the American Museum of Natural History (Williams, *Rec. Dom. Mus.* 3 (3): 224; 1960). It seems certain, therefore, that the von Hugel

grebe specimen in question was collected by him in the course of his Te Anau expedition. That von Hugel was an avid bird collector is evident from the contents of his letter and from his statement (p. 393) that he had at the date he wrote already obtained some 300 New Zealand specimens.

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[The diary of T. H. Potts referred to above and quoted in Acland's *The Early Canterbury Runs* is in the possession of Mr David McMillan, F.R.C.S., of Christchurch (pers. comm.). Only the sections 6 April 1855 - 1 April 1858 and 1 January 1865 - 2 December 1865 are known to have survived according to an article by the owner (Memoir Thomas Henry Potts (1824-88) *History and Bibliography* No. 2: 160-172; August 1948) in which he gave ornithological extracts later used by Dawson & Cresswell in 1949, ("Bird life at Governor's Bay, Banks Peninsula. *N.Z. Bird Notes* 3 (6): 141-146). A manuscript record of nests found 1855-1882 also still exists. The article on Potts stated (p. 164) that in his diary for July 1856 he "... noted a pair or two of the great crested grebe on one of the lakes near Lake Coleridge." A bibliographic history of Acland's book was also given (pp. 156-157).

— Ed.]



The Editor,  
Sir,

#### HISTORY OF THE DISCOVERY OF THE CRESTED GREBE

In his article on the history of the discovery of the Crested Grebe in New Zealand (*Notornis* 24 (3); 167-177; Sept. 1977), Dr K. E. Westerskov devoted a paragraph to speculation on the identity of the collector of a Rothschild specimen credited to A. von Hugel, December 1874, collected at Lake Wakatipu. The suggestion in the article is that A. von Hugel may have obtained the specimen from his father Baron Carl von Hugel who visited New Zealand in 1834.

The 1874 date on the label is correct. Anatole von Hugel (1856-1928) arrived in Invercargill from Melbourne on 19 December 1874, and purchased a number of natural history specimens from a dealer (probably James Morton of Tay Street) before travelling north, as recounted in his letter to Bowdler Sharpe published in *Ibis* 1875.

As Dr Westerskov makes generous acknowledgment of my critical reading of his manuscript, I must offer him an apology for regrettable lack of attention at the end of the exercise.

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