



Red-breasted Merganser



Snowy Owl



Dark-eyed Junco

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## Winter Bird Notes

### *Podiceps auritus* (Horned Grebe)

**ORDER:** Podicipediformes (1 Family)

**FAMILY:** Podicipedidae (22 Species)

There are many exciting nature related things to share with you this week! The temperatures dropped into the 40s for the daytime highs, but, that hasn't stopped the remarkable seasonal changes.

Canadian geese (*Branta canadensis*) are in large numbers along the lakefront right now. They are foraging in the grass, resting, water bathing by flapping their wings with great force, or leisurely quenching thirst by dipping their beak into the water then gracefully lifting their head high and allowing gravity to move the water down their long neck and into the digestive tract. In fact, while I was watching some geese drinking water, I noticed three large chinook salmon swimming near the underwater boulders along the Milwaukee Art Museum sidewalk. They would swim under the geese then return to the boulders and they continued this routine for a long time. At any rate, the geese are also walking around in large groups. You can see evidence of this by looking at their webbed footprints all over the pebble beach at Lakeshore State Park. This location is also an ideal spot for American coots (*Fulica americana*) and ring-billed gulls (*Larus delawarensis*). You can hear the distinct high pitched "scree" song of the ring-billed gulls that are on the wing or are standing on the shoreline.

I was pleasantly surprised to hear and see an "ear-full" or "museum" of cedar waxwings (*Bombycilla cedrorum*) perched in the river birch trees near the north entrance to Lakeshore State Park. As they flew away, I could see the bright yellow bands on their tail tips.



I noticed a small diving bird while walking along the lake in Veteran's Park. It had such grace diving, just like a loon. I don't even think there was a ripple on the water surface after it dove. I determined it was a horned grebe (*Podiceps auritus*) because of its distinctive white cheeks and throat with contrasting black crown, red eye, and thick bill. This bird was calling to another nearby horned grebe with a plastic, trilled song. In general, grebes have numerous interesting characteristics! Here is a list of my favorite behaviors:



Horned Grebe

First, they can disappear under the water from a resting position to avoid a predator. They simply **melt** into the water! Grebes can do this by contracting their abdominal muscles while exhaling which subsequently causes the plumage to compress closer to their body.

Another unique feature of the grebe is their large **feet** which makes them look like they are wearing mittens. The toes are lobed, not webbed, just like the coot. This anatomical foot characteristic allows for propulsion and underwater steering.

Smaller grebes, with their smaller bills, will typically eat invertebrates, aquatic vegetation, and even small fish swimming close to the water surface. In contrast, larger grebes, with their larger bills and longer necks, will eat primarily fish and dive further under water. Larger grebes will either grab or spear fish with their **"dagger-like" bills**. Did you know these bigger grebes can dive nearly 90 feet?

Another amazing biological peculiarity of the grebe is that it **ingests its feathers**! The gizzard function is not effective enough in these fish-eating birds to crush bones that are swallowed. Scientists have speculated that the ingested feathers protect the stomach from potential punctures from fish bones and help aid in pellet formation from undigestible material. Interestingly, pellet formation has also been found to be beneficial in removing unwanted intestinal parasites. One more feather fact is that grebes will molt all their flight feathers at one time soon after breeding season. This makes them water bound for up to a month.

If there is a **courtship** to observe at least once in your lifetime, it is that of the grebe! The ballet display, I understand, is one to anticipate and experience. Hopefully, this spring I will catch this repertoire for the first time!

One more interesting breeding habit the monogamous pair will do is build a **floating nest** made of aquatic vegetation. Additionally, the parents will **carry chicks** on their backs, just like loons, for protection and warmth. The adult can even swim underwater with their chicks still safely snuggled on their backs!

The magical grebe

With your  
disappearing act

And ballet dancing

Haiku

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