

THE VILLAGE BIRDING LIFE

“I Am Not a Duck”

by HSV Audubon

We suspect that many of the early fall reports of ducks on the Village lakes are mistaken ID's. Yes, they look like ducks and swim like ducks but they certainly don't sound like ducks. In fact, this time of the year, grebes make no sound at all. But then, neither do most ducks.

Grebes are a completely different family than ducks. There are several differences. The major difference is not obvious to bird watchers. Ducks have webbed feet, grebes have lobed feet- read- not webbed. Ducks have “shovel-like” bills, grebe bills can range from chicken-like to short speared bills. Ducks have no problem waddling on the ground; grebes can barely walk because their feet are placed far back on their bodies. This is great for swimming but a handicap for walking. A scared duck flies; a scared grebe dives or sinks.

There are 22 species of grebes world wide. Seven of these are common in North America. Only three species are typical in Arkansas; although, six of the seven species have been observed in the state. Pied-billed and Horned grebes are common on the Village lakes during the winter. Both live and breed in the northern states, Canada and ranging to Alaska in the summer. Pied-billed grebes are a nondescript brown color, darker on their back and head. They often have a ring around their chicken-like bill if you see them with binoculars. Horned grebes are shades of gray, darker on their back and head with whitish flanks and throats. Their bill is pointy and longer. Pied-billed grebes, at least in the Village, tend to be in shallower water and closer to shore. Eared-grebes, which look similar to horned grebes in the winter, have been seen in the Village but are rare.

Grebes dive to feed on aquatic insects, crayfish and small fish. They nest in whatever good cover they can find in the water. Their babies at first are not good swimmers often end up being carried on the back of a parent.

Bottom line, if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck and makes no sound like a duck, it just may may not be a duck.

As always HSVBIRDS.ORG has a lot of information about everything you'd like to know about birds. You will see on the website that HSV Audubon has available a Village birding checklist. It lists the over 200 species of birds that might be seen in the Village, when they might be seen and how common they are. It's a great way to keep track of the birds at your feeder.

Photos by Vic Prislipsky