

Grebes

As I write this on November 19th there is a smart, and quite tame, Slavonian Grebe on the pools at Pickleridge. "A what?" I hear you cry. It's true, the Slavonian Grebe is not a bird on most non-birdwatchers' radar, but they are regular, though scarce winter visitors to Pembrokeshire. This bird is in winter plumage, and looks quite a lot like a Dabchick but it is grey and white with a black cap and silvery sides and is just a bit bigger and slimmer looking. It is also much tamer than the Dabchicks on the pools, which are always very keen to move away as soon as they spot a human or a dog. Of course, Dabchicks are a type of grebe too – their correct name being Little Grebe.



All grebes have distinct summer and winter plumages. The Slavonian Grebe looks resplendent in summer, with a black and dark red body and brilliant gold head plumes, giving rise to their American name of Horned Grebe. You would generally have to travel some distance to see this though – a few breed in Scotland but most breed in Scandinavia, Russia and Canada. The Scottish breeders are not doing too well – their nests suffer from wave damage and predation, and unfortunately they are decreasing throughout their range for reasons that are unclear.



The Great-crested Grebe, a larger relative of the Slavonian, is not a very common bird in Pembrokeshire. They are more frequent in the winter when they can be seen on large water-bodies and in sheltered bays, at which time they look something like a very large version of a Slavonian Grebe. In the summer, they acquire the fabulous head plumes and collar which were almost the cause of their demise – they were hunted almost to extinction in Europe so that Edwardian ladies could put the plumes, and in some cases, the whole head, of a grebe on their extravagant hats.

This was not just a European problem - by 1900, more than five million birds were being killed every year in the USA to satisfy the hat plume trade. Such excesses eventually led to the formation of the RSPB and equivalent organisations in the USA.

Since the early 20th century the Great Crested Grebe population has increased substantially, helped by the formation of new lakes from ex-gravel pits. However, they are not a common breeder in Pembrokeshire – we probably don't have enough of the right kind of lake - and they only regularly breed at Rosebush. This is a shame as they have a very elaborate courtship display which is well worth seeing.

Below: Extract from a plume catalogue



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