Plate 2

GREBES

Freshwater diving birds with a distinctive silhouette - dumpy body, low to the water, with rounded rear end because of no visible tail; bill pointed; head held erect. Sexes alike. They feed underwater, propelled by special lobed feet. Their legs are so far back they are in the air above the water when disturbed or during displays, but can fly at will. Gather in loose flocks in autumn and winter. Silent. Nests are bulky floating structures, often attached to emergent or overhanging vegetation. Lay 2-4 chalky white eggs, staining to brown; covered whenever the adult leaves the nest. Chicks are carried on an adult's back when very small. Young have striped heads, through to the age of independence.

HOARY-HEADED GREBE Poliocephalus poliocephalus Rare Australian vagrant

26 cm, 290 g. Similar to NZ Dabchick in size and habit; neck puffed and slimmer than other small grebes. Breeding adult dark grey above, breast pale buff, head prominently striped silver (hoary), eye net contrasting bill tipped white. Non-breeding adult pale grey with contrasting grey-brown cap to base of neck and extending as a dark stripe from the crown down the hindneck; bill pinkish. Regularly swims with thin neck held erect. Habitat: Lakes and farm ponds.

NEW ZEALAND DABCHICK

HOARY-HEADED GREBE

breeding non-breeding

AUSTRALIAN LITTLE GREBE

breeding non-breeding

GREBES

20 species; 4 in New Zealand region, including 1 endemic.

An ancient group of diving birds, quite unrelated to the family Anatidae (swans, geese, ducks). Grebes may have diverged early in evolution. Their lobed toes (not webbed) propel and steer them underwater. Their tails are a vestigial tuft only, not a rudder. Their large feet are set well back, making them efficient swimmers but extremely awkward on land. They avoid their small narrow wings are not used in swimming but are used for flight. Grebes are nocturnal and often hide on large lakes or (seldom in New Zealand) in estuaries and harbours.

Sexes are alike, but males are larger than females on average and have longer bills. Fish-eating grebes have long, pointed bills, whereas invertebrate-eaters have short, stubby bills.

6. HOARY-HEADED GREBE Poliocephalus poliocephalus Plate 2

Since 28 cm, 250 g. Distribution: Australia, mostly south of 20°S, and in Tasmania. First New Zealand records were in 1975, at The Snares and at Lake Horowhenua. A pair bred near Te Anau in 1975-76, and later two pairs bred until 1979. In the late 1970s, there were many widely scattered sightings, mostly of single birds that did not stay long, from Northland to Southland. Records after 1980 are few and mainly in the South Island, but to date they have failed to become established. Breeding: Similar to New Zealand Dabchick. In Australia, they lay 4-5 eggs (40 x 28 mm, 16 g), mostly in October-January, and chicks are recorded November-February.

Feeding: Their diet of aquatic invertebrates taken underwater is similar to that of the New Zealand Dabchick.