

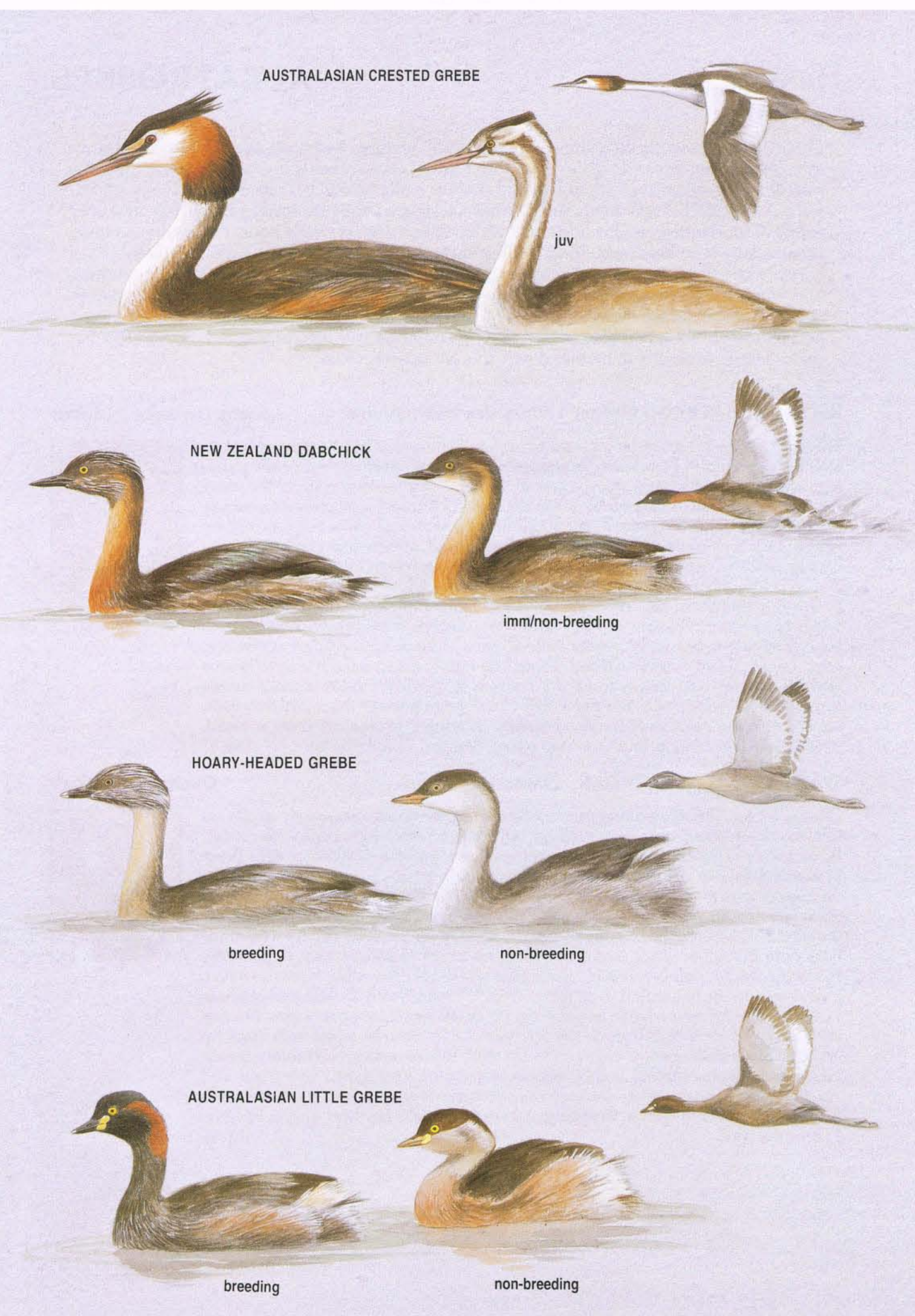
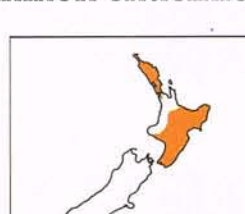
Freshwater diving birds with a distinctive silhouette – dumpy body, low to the water, with rounded rear end because of no visible tail; bill pointed; head held erect. Sexes alike. They feed underwater, propelled by special lobed feet. As their legs are set well back, they are awkward on land and seldom venture onto it. Patter across the water when disturbed or during displays, but can fly well at night. 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.

NEW ZEALAND DABCHICK (Weweia) *Poliiocephalus rufopectus*

Uncommon endemic

29 cm, 250 g. A small dark grebe with a dumpy body, slim neck, small head, short bill and tiny, fluffy white tail. *Blackish head, finely streaked with silver feathers; prominent yellow eye; rusty chestnut foreneck and breast.* After breeding, plumage paler and nondescript. After several months, juveniles look like adults. Dives frequently, often smoothly but sometimes after a leap. When alarmed, swims quietly away on or under the water, or skitters across the water, its rapidly beating wings hitting the surface.

Habitat: Sheltered parts of lakes, farm ponds and, in winter, sewage oxidation ponds. Locally common in North I; a rare vagrant to South I. **Breeding:** Jun–Mar. [Sp 5]



GREBES

Podicipedidae

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

on from the lineage that gave rise to the penguins, petrels, pelicans and storks.

Grebes are aquatic specialists, usually living on clear, shallow freshwater lakes and ponds, particularly those with mud, clay or sand on the bottom and emergent or floating

vegetation. 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 clumsy on land, which they avoid. Their small narrow wings are not used in swimming but are used for flight, mainly at night. In winter, many gather on large lakes or (seldom in New Zealand) in estuaries and harbours.

which may help in the forming of pellets.

The nest is a mass of sodden waterweed and sticks, attached to submerged or emergent vegetation. The eggs, laid at intervals of about two days, are white but soon become stained brown. They are covered with vegetation when the bird leaves the nest. Young chicks often ride on their parents' backs. The chicks of almost all grebes have stripes on the head and neck, remnants of which remain for several months after they have become independent juveniles. After breeding, most grebes moult all their flight feathers at once and so are flightless for several weeks; presumably true of New Zealand grebes also.

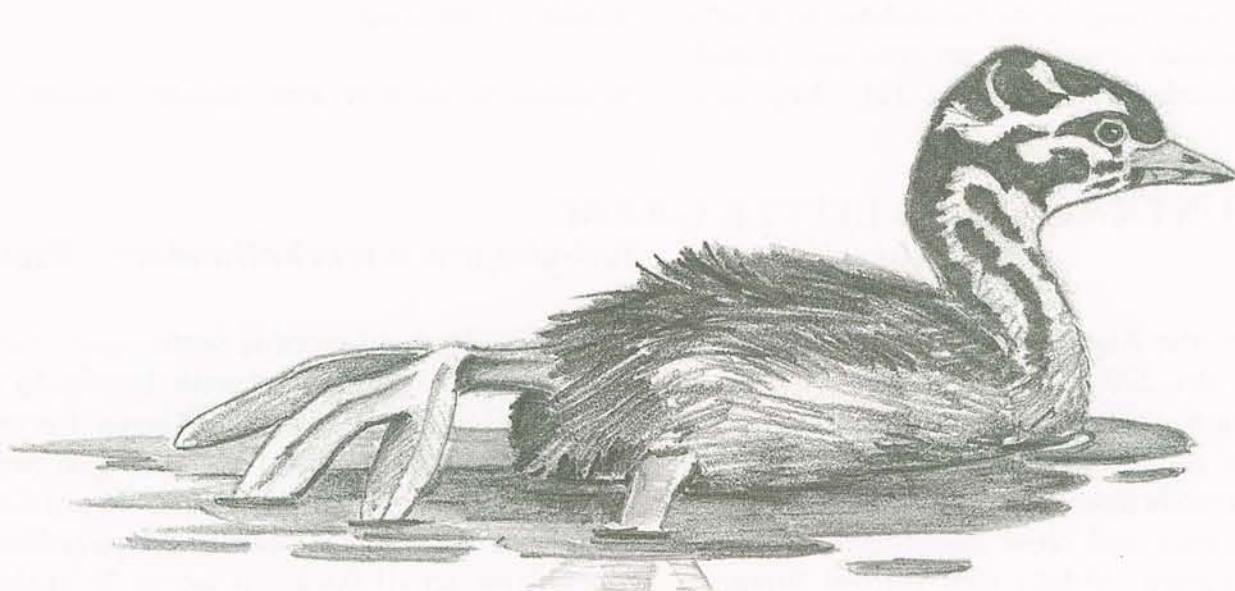
Sexes are alike, but males are larger than females on average and have longer bills. Fish-eating grebes have long, pointed bills, whereas invertebrate-eaters have short, stubby bills. Most, especially fish-eaters, swallow their own feathers, especially breast and flank feathers,

5. NEW ZEALAND DABCHICK *Poliiocephalus rufopectus* Plate 2

Other name: Weweia
Size: 29 cm, 250 g
Distribution: Well distributed in the North Island, on coastal lakes from North Cape to Pukekohe and from southern Taranaki to Paraparaumu; on the lakes and dams of the Volcanic Plateau, especially Rotoiti and southern Taupo; and in the east, on the lakes and dams of Gisborne, Hawke's Bay and the Wairarapa. In autumn, many birds gather on favoured lakes, especially the southern end of Taupo, on Rotoiti, Okareka (Rotorua district), Hatuma (Waipukurau), Horowhenua (Levin), and sewage oxidation ponds, especially those of Masterton, Waikanae and Marton. They do not flock on estuaries or coastal bays, as small grebes do elsewhere. Wintering birds appear in some localities where few breed, e.g. Lakes Hatuma and

Horowhenua. Vagrants reach Marlborough. **Population:** c. 1700 (c. 100 Northland, c. 500 Volcanic Plateau, c. 400 Hawke's Bay, c. 150 Wairarapa, c. 400 Manawatu). Extinct in the South Island.

Conservation: Protected threatened endemic. Formerly sparingly distributed on lowland lakes of the South Island but declined rapidly in the nineteenth century, of unknown causes. The last certain breeding record was on Lake Fergus, upper Eglinton Valley (1941). The only recent records are three single birds in Marlborough (June 1987, October 2001 and December 2001). The widespread construction of farm dams and ponds, which Dabchicks may use for breeding, and sewage oxidation ponds, which they often winter on, has been to their advantage recently.



Breeding: An extended breeding season, with laying in June–March, mostly September–December. They lay 2–3 eggs (43 x 29 mm, 18 g) in a depression in a pile of decomposing plant material, which is usually floating and anchored to a willow branch or emergent vegetation, or in shallow water resting on the bottom. The eggs are white but soon become stained brown. Both sexes incubate for 22–23 days, starting when the first egg is laid. Whenever an adult leaves the nest without being flushed, it covers the eggs. Newly hatched chicks swim and dive freely, and travel on an adult's back, where they are fed. They may need 10 weeks to become fully independent.

one water body to another only at night; by day they dive, swim or skitter across the surface if disturbed. In mild alarm, a Dabchick floats stern-on with the rear-end fluffed out, presenting a white eye-like pattern to the human intruder or another Dabchick approaching its territory. Dabchicks are silent. **Feeding:** Diet is mainly aquatic insects (especially water-boatmen) and their larvae, and small molluscs taken underwater. Larger food, such as fish and freshwater crayfish are sometimes taken. Unlike many grebes, the Dabchick does not eat feathers, presumably because of its invertebrate diet.

In the hand: Males are larger than females, but most measurements overlap. Birds with a bill longer than 22.5 mm are considered males, those with shorter bills are considered females.

Reading: Buddle, G.A. 1939. *Emu* 39: 77–84. Heather, B.D. 1988. *Notornis* 35: 185–191. Lusk, C.H. & Lusk, J.R. 1981. *Notornis* 28: 203–208.