

GREBES

Order PODICIPEDIFORMES

Vol. I., p. 21.

THE grebes—with which are often included the *Colymbiformes*, or divers, which are northern birds, not entering the tropics—can be distinguished from most other aquatic birds by their extremely dense, thick, soft and silky plumage, and the very short tail, which is little more than vestigial. The tarsus is at most equal to and generally shorter than the middle toe and claw. Toes with wide lateral lobes, like that of a coot or finfoot. Bill somewhat variable, straight, pointed or curved downwards—short and slightly bent downwards in the only local species.

Grebes are highly aquatic birds, of greater powers of flight than would appear from their short and rounded wings, and excellent swimmers and divers. They are found mostly in fresh-water lakes and rivers which are well vegetated. About forty forms are known, occurring throughout the world, except on the islands of Oceania (*Robinson*, Vol. I., p. 21).

Only one small species, a close relative of the English dabchick, is known to occur in Malaya.

Podiceps ruficollis philippensis

The Philippine Little Grebe

Colymbus Philippensis Bonnat, *Tabl. Encycl. Meth.*, i., 1790, p. 58, pl. 46, fig. 3 (Philippine Islands).

Podicipes philippensis (part), Ogilvie-Grant, *Cat. Birds, Brit. Mus.*, xxvi., 1898, p. 511.

Podicipes fluviatilis philippensis, Robinson and Kloss, *Journ. Nat. Hist. Soc. Siam*, v., 1921, p. 45.

Podiceps ruficollis albipennis, Herbert, *Journ. Siam. Soc., Nat. Hist. Suppl.*, vi., 1926, p. 355.

Malay Name.—Unrecorded. Nok koo-at; nok pet-pi (*Siamese*, ghost duck, *vide* Herbert).

Description.—*Adult in breeding plumage.*—“Above dark, glossy seal-brown; chin, fore throat, and cheeks blackish; throat, sides of neck, and ear coverts chestnut; breast and abdomen silvery white, mixed with a little blackish brown and gradually shading into blackish brown on fore breast,

sides, flanks, and lower belly; thighs, blackish mixed with a little light chestnut; wings, black; under wing coverts, axillars, and tips of short secondaries white" (*McGregor*).

Adult in non-breeding plumage.—Chin and throat, white; chestnut of the head and neck much paler. Under parts paler, less washed with brown.

Immature.—Rather like the non-breeding plumage of adults, but with no chestnut on the head and neck.

Soft Parts.—Iris, lemon; lower mandible, cream, upper mandible, black, edges pale yellow, base of bill pale green; feet, dark sage-green. (South-West Siam, non-breeding plumage, April: *Robinson and Kloss*.)

Dimensions.—Total length, 9.25 to 10.75 in.; wing, 3.8 to 4.25 in.; tarsus, 1.3 in.; bill from gape, 1.1 in. There is considerable variation in the size of the bill.

Range in the Malay Peninsula.—Known only from Peninsular Siam where it occurs in the large reed-beds of the Talé Sap in the Siamese district of Patelung, near Singgora. It will possibly be met with in the swampy country on the east coast of Pahang and Johore.

Extralimital Range.—The typical form of this grebe (*Podiceps r. ruficollis*) is the common dabchick of Europe, which is represented in Africa and India by a very closely allied geographical race, or subspecies (*P. r. capensis*). Birds from Peninsular Siam seem nearest to *philippensis*, but others from Raheng in West Siam are nearer to the Indian bird on account of their whiter secondaries. The little grebe is widely distributed, and forms of it are also found in Japan, China, and through the various island groups to Australia and Tasmania.

Nidification.—There is no published record of the nesting of this grebe within our area, but Mr E. G. Herbert has eggs taken in Central Siam on 25th June and 22nd October. He describes the nest as a moderately small quantity of weeds piled on to the growing surface-weeds, with a depression in the centre for the eggs. In India it is said that almost any weed-covered piece of water is used as a nesting site. The following notes are based on Mr Herbert's published account of his eggs taken in Siam. The eggs are moderately elongated ovals much pointed at both ends, although some are more regular ovals and have only one end pointed. When first laid the colour is white, but the eggs soon become stained and are usually *café-au-lait* in colour when found. The texture is fairly close, but of a chalky nature, and blemishes in the formation of the shell are frequently noticeable. There is only a small amount of gloss. The yolk is deep reddish-orange in colour, and viewed through the blow-hole the shell appears deep green. The clutch probably consists of five eggs, which measure about 1.4 by 1 in.

Habits.—We have no information relating to the habits of this grebe within our area. Specimens collected at Koh Lak in South-West Siam in April are in non-breeding plumage: the birds were stated to be very common on a shallow pond near the coast, together with two species of jacanas. The following account of the habits is adapted from Mr Hugh Whistler's *Popular Handbook of Indian Birds*. It may be said virtually never to land on terra

firma ; **except when travelling** it spends its whole life in the water, swimming, like a **cormorant**, very low in the beam and ready to dive at the least sign of danger. **Much of its food** in the way of small fishes is captured under water, for **it dives well and** can swim far beneath the surface : though it also feeds **on the surface** and there procures vegetable matter, small mollusca and water-insects. Quantities of their own feathers are found in the gizzards of grebes, **either with or without pebbles**, and they are apparently swallowed for the **same digestive** purposes for which the latter are swallowed by most birds. It rises from the water with some difficulty owing to the comparatively small size of its wings, but once in the air travels well and fast. The wing feathers in autumn are shed simultaneously as in the ducks, so that for a short period the bird is virtually flightless. Ordinarily it is found singly or in small parties. Numbers breed on the same water, but their nesting habits can hardly be called colonial.