

# Nesting Pied-billed Grebes at Crabtree Marsh

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It was the summer of an avid birder's dream - an Olivaceous Cormorant was seen at Crabtree Nature Center in Cook County - but for us, it was a chance to observe and photograph nesting Pied-billed Grebes.

A low-lying area just east of Crabtree was flooded by beavers in 1992. We hoped to photograph Yellow-Headed Blackbirds that had been seen in this area. Not only were Yellow-Headed blackbirds nesting, but also part of this marsh nursery were Pied-billed Grebes, Black Terns, Wood Ducks, American Coots, and Common Moorhens. Growing cattails hid most of the nests. Only after searching carefully with binoculars, and watching birds closely were we able to locate several nests.

Most were not photographable; however, we had an unobstructed view of a Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*) on a nest which was fairly close to shore, with no cattails interfering. The nesting grebe was about 60 feet from the road, and well camouflaged. Her plumage and nest closely matched the color of the surrounding vegetation. In fact few birders hoping to get a sight of the Olivaceous Cormorant noticed her, although they scanned the area with binoculars.

We wondered: Was the nest active? Were there eggs? Would she



*Pied-billed Grebe on nest at Crabtree Marsh near Crabtree Nature Center, Cook County, mid-July 1992. Photo by Annalee Fjellberg and Adam Fikso.*

lay eggs if she hadn't already? Patiently we waited until the grebe left the nest and we could see its interior. There were no eggs yet. Perhaps soon....

Pied-billed Grebe eggs hatch about 23 days after they are laid (Ehrlich, Dobin & Wheye 1988). In order to know when the grebe began laying her clutch, we observed the nest every other day and checked for eggs. On 25 June 1992, we spotted EGGS. Now we trekked out every day, because we weren't sure when they had first been laid. Assuming a nesting bird might be wary, we looked for natural screens so the grebe wouldn't be disturbed by our presence. Although she didn't seem disturbed when birders walked along the highway shoulder, stopping seemed to alert her, so we approached

and left the nesting area slowly, using bushes to screen us and being unobtrusive as possible.

The female would sometimes close her eyes or preen.

The male and female both incubated the eggs. Before leaving the nest, the grebe would first pick up floating vegetation from around the nest, and cover the eggs with it. Then the grebe left the nest after softly calling its mate.

The male tended to stay about 200 feet from the nest and he swam to it underwater. The eggs were turned occasionally, usually just before the grebe left the nest. The incubating parents only exchanged places when no one was walking along the highway shoulder.

On 12 July our patience was rewarded. We spotted two chicks. The next day we saw three more! We spent the next two weeks observing the behavior of the adults and watching the young develop.

Both the male and the female brought food to the nestlings. Within a day or two after hatching the chicks peeped continuously when they saw the adult, who then climbed awkwardly into the nest with food. Within a few days, the adults no longer entered the nest and chicks scrambled to the edge of the nest to take it from them. In their eagerness, the nestlings often slid into the water and while one adult was finding food

**Meadowlark**