



Urban Wildlife Issues
Wildlife Rescue column by Nicky Fried
as appearing in the *Burnaby NOW*

Burnaby Lake is alive with the dance of the pied-billed grebe

When I fly I like my landings smooth. An unusually bumpy touch-down at Heathrow airport in London, England last month, reminded me that despite our technological achievements, nature still does it best.

Take our Western Grebe. No float plane could ever land like a Grebe. And as for their mating dances (when pairs spin across the water elevated on their fast-paddling feet) well that's beyond any human machine.

Grebes spend the bulk of their life on the water. These birds are beautifully adapted for diving, which is helpful when your diet consists of fish and aquatic insects. The flip side is that they are very ungainly on land, as their legs are set very far back and their toes are lobed.

Grebes are winter visitors to our part of the world; we have number of Pied-billed Grebes on Burnaby Lake right now. They leave the interior in September and October, often stopping on lakes along the way to feed and rest. They winter in small groups or large flocks. The largest flock apparently numbered 10,000 birds. In April and May they head back inland to breed. Grebes build their nests on emergent vegetation on lakes. Cattle overgrazing and human development can threaten traditional Grebe breeding grounds.

One unfortunate member of this ancient and unique family of birds was trapped in Edmonton on his journey south, when he crash landed on the pavement. This is not an unusual accident for Grebes. They mistake wet pavement for water. Once they are on dry land they're in trouble, because they need to run across water to take off. The poor things are stranded.

This fellow was taken in by a local rescue centre and eventually shipped to the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC (WRA), because of our unique waterfowl facilities. Along the way his feathering was oiled, another major issue for water birds. What it means is that the bird is no longer waterproof and can become water logged and cold very quickly. Feeding and surviving in this condition in the wild is impossible. Staff members at WRA are experienced at cleaning oiled birds, which was another reason he was sent to us.

He is now in one of our specialized pools. The pool needs to be deep enough for diving birds to do what comes naturally. In a nearby pool, we have a Pied-billed Grebe who also crashed, but a little closer to home. This Grebe had an open dislocation on both

toes and had to have a partial amputation of one of his toes. However he is doing well and eating fish and worms. The two birds cannot be housed in the same pool as they will fight.

Grebes, are found in many different areas of the world. They are unique in that they are not closely related to other bird species. The Grebe family is apparently 80 million years old and there are many fossil records of this interesting bird. Although Grebes appear to be doing well, two members of this species have become extinct in the last ten years; the huge flightless *Podiceps gigus* of Lake Atitlan in Guatemala and the *Podiceps andinus* of the Columbia Andes.

Here's an interesting aside on the biology of our own Western Grebe. For a hundred years the Western Grebe and Clark's Grebe were considered a single species. However they are not and will never mate, although they will nest right next to one another. It's hard to tell them apart; Clark's appears to have more white plumage and a brighter orange bill.

We are very fortunate to have this long surviving creature in our midst. These graceful, red-eyed birds are a reminder that different can be good.

I join the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC in wishing my readers well over the holidays. Thank you for sharing our interest in wildlife, whose differences make our world so very wonderful.