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Photo Quiz

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August 2003 Quiz

Glenn Coady

This issue's photo quiz is that of a largely black and white water bird with little in the way of colour clues except for a bright red iris and some orange tones to the basal half of the bill. Although most winter loons exhibit this general pattern, this bird's relatively shorter, pointed bill and squat, puffy looking body easily eliminate any of the loons from consideration. Similarly, any duck that has such a plain black and white plumage can be eliminated from consideration by this bird's short, narrow and sharply pointed bill. The lack of visible tubular nostrils on this bird's bill further eliminates any of the black and white patterned shearwaters, petrels, storm-petrels or other "tubenoses". The phalaropes all have relatively longer bills and paler backs, and tend to look more slender and attenuated than this bird. None of the small or medium sized alcids that have a bill even remotely similar to this bird have such strikingly contrasting reddish eyes.

It is probably safe to say that intuitively most observers would quickly recognize that this mostly black and white, puffy looking bird, with a short, pointed bill and tail feathers so inconsequential that they go unseen among fluffy tail coverts, belongs to the grebe family.

Only five of the seven North American grebe species have occurred in Ontario, so the possible candidates are few. Pied-billed Grebe is tawnier in all plumages than this bird and it has dark eyes and a much thicker bill, and is thus ruled out. The much larger Western Grebe can be eliminated easily also as it has an obviously longer and more cleanly white-sided neck, and a much longer, and more uniformly yellow-olive bill. Red-necked Grebe can be eliminated also based on the combination of its longer neck, and much longer and heavier bill, in combination with its darker eyes.

We have thus narrowed our choice to being between Horned Grebe and Eared Grebe in their respective nonbreeding (basic) plumages, perhaps the most common scenario for confusion in grebe identification experienced by Ontario observers.

Several aspects of the bill are useful in separating these two species of grebes. The Horned Grebe tends to have a slightly thicker, straighter bill that shows a more symmetrical dagger shape, such that both the upper and lower edges curve roughly equally to form a slightly more blunt point. The Eared Grebe tends to have a finer, more sharply pointed, and more

noticeable upturned appearance to the bill (resulting from a straighter culmen and a distally upturned lower mandible). Much practice is needed with these structural clues, however, and observers should note that artists' depictions in most North American field guides tend to illustrate these variations as less subtly different than they often appear in the field (or certainly from photos). Another note of caution is that in our quiz photo, we are seeing this bird's bill from an oblique angle that is slightly above the bill, making some of these assessments difficult. Keeping these considerations in mind, we can note that, for all the characters discussed above, our quiz bird is more consistent with the appearance of Eared Grebe. However, Horned Grebes also overwhelmingly tend to exhibit a small, highly contrasting whitish tip to the bill in all seasons. Eared Grebes usually have a uniformly dark bill tip. For this character, our quiz bird is again more consistent with Eared Grebe.

There are many plumage characters that are useful in separating these two grebes in winter. The Eared Grebe usually shows a dark auricular patch bordered by a white crescent-shaped area starting from the chin and extending up the back of the head to the rear of the auriculars. In stark contrast, the Horned Grebe usually shows an all white area on the head below the level of the eye (including whitish auriculars). Much more often than not,

the Eared Grebe will exhibit dark lores with little or no area of pale contrast. Contrary to this, the Horned Grebe predominantly tends to show an often much paler area of contrast in the lores versus the dark crown. Eared Grebes are much more likely to be dusky plumaged on the front and sides of the neck than Horned Grebes, which usually show a sharper demarcation between a dusky hind-neck and cleaner, whitish foreneck.

The Horned Grebe generally shows a fairly flat crown profile, with a more gently sloped forehead and a crown peak occurring well back behind the eye on the head. In contrast, the Eared Grebe shows a highly peaked head, with a forehead that rises much more abruptly from the bill, a crown peak that occurs above or before the eye, and gives a general impression of a much greater volume of head above the eye level. Once again, for all these characters, our quiz bird appears to be more consistent with the appearance of Eared Grebe.

Two other general impression clues often can help in separating these two grebes. The many head characteristics discussed above combine to give the Eared Grebe a small, circular-headed appearance and the Horned Grebe a relatively larger, more triangular-headed appearance. Additionally, the Eared Grebe is the much more likely of the two species to fluff up its rear feathers in an exaggerated fashion to give an overly buoyant, "high-

stern" appearance, also characteristic of Pied-billed Grebe and Least Grebe. Our quiz bird remains more consistent for both of these impressions with the expected appearance for Eared Grebe.

Indeed, this **Eared Grebe** was photographed by Sam Barone at Humber Bay Park East in Toronto on 1 January 2000.

It should be noted that in early spring both Eared Grebe and Horned Grebe are often seen in Ontario sporting much more confusing transitional plumages as they begin to attain their breeding plumage. Many of the above mentioned plumage criteria for separating

the two in winter are either equivocal or much less easy to apply then. It is in these cases where experience with the structural cues will become even more important in helping identify such birds.

Correction: In the April 2003 photo quiz, in speculating on the age of the Kirtland's Warbler depicted, the section which reads "and bright white (rather than buffy) edges to the rear scapulars" should have read "and bright white (rather than buffy) edges to the median primary coverts". This was an error I failed to correct in transcribing from my field notes.

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