

## STATUS OF THE RED-NECKED GREBE IN MASSACHUSETTS

by Richard S. Forster, Framingham

The Red-necked Grebe (Podiceps grisegena) has always been a familiar, if somewhat uncommon, visitor to Massachusetts whose numbers fluctuate widely from year to year. There is some discrepancy between the status as detailed in the most recent publications on Massachusetts birds. Griscom and Snyder (1955) listed this grebe as a common fall transient and an irregular, but never common, winter resident. They stated that the Red-necked Grebe is an irregular spring migrant with peak numbers recorded anytime from late February to early May but that these concentrations were by no means an annual occurrence. In contrast, Bailey (1955) states that Red-necked Grebe is a common winter resident along the coast and implies that Red-necked Grebes are regular, even common, spring and fall transients along the coast and occasionally appear inland. The present pattern of distribution indicates that none of these statements are correct and that the seasonal distribution is variable, irregular and subject to independent interpretation.

The Red-necked Grebe breeds on freshwater lakes and marshes from Alaska, western and central southern Canada south to northern United States (Washington east to Minnesota). It winters along the Pacific coast from southeastern Alaska to central California and on the Atlantic coast from Newfoundland south to Florida, although south of Massachusetts it is decidedly uncommon. In midwinter, counts of Red-necked Grebes are greatest in Nova Scotia and Maine.

In fall migration Red-necked Grebes are infrequently reported, mostly as individuals flying past coastal vantage points. Occasionally, singles and small groups are seen resting on the water. With few exceptions winter counts of Red-necked Grebes do not indicate a general presence along the coast as reflected by the Christmas Bird Counts.

Beginning usually in late February, numbers build up in favored locations like Manomet Point, the North Shore from Nahant to Cape Ann, and the bay shore of Cape Cod particularly at Corporation Beach in Dennis. These numbers build to a peak in March or early April. Because of the timing of these gatherings it is easy to consider these grebes migrants, but they are probably birds that have steadily moved down from the north as the winter progressed. The general lack of reports from regions south of Massachusetts does not provide supporting evidence for a build-up of spring migrants.

An interesting facet of these concentrations is that the birds are often observed in groups sleeping or resting with their bills tucked into the feathers on the back. This

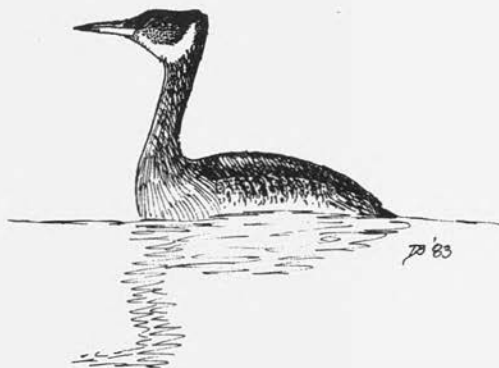
attitude presents a problem in identification because female Red-breasted Mergansers (Mergus serrator) are often present in these congregations.

During late February and March of 1977 unprecedented numbers of Red-necked Grebes were reported along the coast. An informal request for sightings was well-received and produced the following counts.

<u>February</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Count</u>
27	Gloucester	122
27	Cohasset to North Scituate	110
<u>March</u>	<u>Location</u>	<u>Count</u>
6	Hull to Brant Rock	306
7	Manomet	250
7	Nantucket	152

The counts listed above represent only the highest numbers. Certainly more than a thousand Red-necked Grebes were present in Massachusetts during this time span. In 1979 another exceptional concentration of Red-necked Grebes occurred at the Wellfleet shore of Cape Cod Bay. On April 4 two thousand were estimated at this location, and four days later eight hundred were still present.

The curious fact that the great majority of these birds was observed resting rather than actively feeding raises the question of when and where they feed. It is possible that Red-necked Grebes feed offshore out of sight of land-based observers. Indeed the previous high count for the species was three hundred observed April 10, 1930 off No Mans Land, a small island south of Martha's Vineyard. Griscom (1955)



Red-necked Grebe

Illustration by Denise Braunhardt

states that this was "the greatest number ever in New England." It is entirely possible that the bulk of the population in the northeast winters out of sight of land thus accounting for low totals recorded on Christmas Bird Counts. Then, prior to migration, the birds move to inshore waters to molt and rest in preparation for the northward journey.

The above explanation for the presence of Red-necked Grebes in Massachusetts is purely speculative. The author would appreciate any information that would help unravel the mysterious comings and goings of this species.

#### REFERENCES

- Bailey, W. 1955. Birds in Massachusetts: When and Where to Find Them. The College Press, South Lancaster, Mass.
- Griscom, L. and D.E. Snyder. 1955. Birds of Massachusetts. Peabody Museum, Salem, Mass.

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Mail detailed plans with measurements (and photographs if available) to: Dr. Stephen W. Kress, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, 159 Sapsucker Woods Road, Ithaca, NY 14850.