

ON GREBE-TRAPPING

By Anne Shreve

At the risk of having the banding office look upon trying to catch a grebe in this manner as a little more than accidental, I would like to tell you about being outsmarted by a little winged amphibian.

There has been a large-mesh net standing at the end of our pond this fall where sand pipers can be flushed and caught. One morning in September a Pied-billed Grebe was swimming there. It seemed rather tame, so I decided to circle the pond once and see if it would fly toward the net. I knew that it would spatter along on top of the water before taking off and though that netting it would be a simple matter. How wrong I was! When I came near, it would simply dive and come up a hundred yards away. Once when it was near the net, I decided to wade in thinking the grebe would choose to fly rather than pass me underwater, but pass me it did, and again it emerged in the far end of the pond. The bottom was slippery and the grebe seemed to recognize that I was out of my element. So the game went on. Sometimes it would execute a noisy, splashy dive, but the typical escape was a slow, submarine-like sinking out of sight. Once, after a long, worried wait on my part, it surfaced not more than three feet from where I stood in the water. When it saw me, it let out a call that sounded exactly like "Oops!" - and immediately dived again.

After twenty minutes or so of this lopsided chase, the grebe dived and did not emerge. I walked around and around the pond, but it simply was not there. It could not have flown without my seeing it. Could what I thought was fun have been terror on the part of the grebe? I ran back to the house and scanned the grebe sections of every book to see if there was any known incident of drowning. Nothing. But in my ancient and beloved "Chapman" there was a note about escape behavior. It said that grebes are able to regulate the degree of body submersion even to the extent of allowing only the tip of the mandibles to remain above water. Ah-ha! Back to the pond. Slowly stalking around the edge. Not a ripple. Then, an explosion like a giant bullfrog leaping from the cat-tails! There wasn't a glimmer of terror in THIS grebe. It spattered across the surface to dead center of the pond where it sat down, spun around a few times then began to preen a little and, I'm sure, laugh alot.

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