

# Kenn Kaufman THE PRACTICED EYE

Text and Illustrations by Kenn Kaufman

## Identifying Monochrome Grebes in Winter

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A SERIOUS INTEREST IN THE fine points of bird identification can do odd things to your perceptions. I was reminded of this when I sat down to write about grebes. The grebes of the genus *Podiceps* show seasonal changes in plumage; they sport tufts and ruffs and bright colors in the breeding season, and that is the time when they are most attractive to human eyes (and, presumably, to each other). But when I think of

grebes, I think first of their appearance in winter, when their colors and decorations are muted and they can be more challenging to identify.

The Horned Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*) and Eared Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*) are both widespread in North America (and in Eurasia as well). They differ from each other in many ways, including shape, colors of breeding plumage, timing of molt and migration, preferred wintering habitat and breeding range, pattern of the downy young, *et cetera*. Their increased similarity in winter is largely owing to default: only so much can be done with a simple pattern of dark above and light below. Still, typical individuals in basic plumage (fall and winter) are not hard to separate. The problems are caused by all those individuals that are not typical.

The Eared Grebe is often considered more of a "western" bird than the Horned Grebe. Actually, in North America the breeding ranges of both species are essentially western, and the main division is latitudinal: The Horned Grebe nests much farther north. The two species overlap extensively in southern Canada,

and from there the Horned extends on north to the edge of the tundra, while the Eared is more a bird of lakes in the interior of the arid west.

From its northern breeding grounds, the Horned Grebe moves south mainly to coastal areas—including the Atlantic Coast, where it is a common winter resident. In recent years, as Steve Stedman has pointed out [*American Birds* 46 (2): 275, Summer 1992], the Horned Grebe has begun to winter regularly on reservoirs in the mid-south, up to 500 miles north of the Gulf of Mexico. Still, I suspect that the major part of the population is on salt water in winter.

The Eared Grebe is a rare but annual visitor to the Atlantic Coast. West of the Mississippi it becomes a regular passage bird on interior lakes and reservoirs, and from the Great Plains westward it is far more common inland than the Horned Grebe. It is common in winter on the Pacific Coast (and on western reaches of the Gulf of Mexico), and it may be seen side by side with the Horned Grebe in some California harbors. But the largest numbers seem to winter on inland waters.

So when birders have problems in identification, these generally involve trying to pick out Eared Grebes in the east or Horned Grebes in the interior of the west.

Typical Horned Grebes in winter have a very clean-cut appearance. They show a sharp line of contrast between black and white on the face, and the neck is cleanly white in front and blackish-gray in back. This is quite a difference from the typical winter Eared Grebe pattern, featuring a dusky face with a blurry whitish "ear" patch, and a gray wash over the neck. If all individuals of the two species conformed to these classic patterns, there would be no problem at all. Unfortunately, there is quite a bit of individual variation. Most bird guides do not mention this, although the latest (1990) edition of Peterson's



**Figure 1.** Eared Grebes, to show some of the variation in pattern on the head and neck during fall and winter. The top two figures show darker and paler examples that might be seen in mid-winter. The lower left bird is still in the process of molting into winter [basic] plumage. Timing of the molt seems to be more variable than in the Horned Grebe; by late fall, when Horneds are all essentially in winter plumage, some Eareds may still be molting. The lower right figure shows a tricky October bird, probably a

young of the year. In the last five years I have seen several birds like this. Such an individual was photographed in Maryland by James Stasz several years ago, and I blithely misidentified the photo as representing a Horned Grebe (*Birding* 18: 288, October 1986), although Stasz himself had identified it correctly as an Eared. Notice that the eye is dull yellow on this bird—many Eared Grebes (perhaps mainly young birds) have odd eye colors, such as yellow or brown, in fall.

*Field Guide to Western Birds* gives a good illustration of variants in both species. This variation is moderate in mid-winter but may be extreme in late fall and early winter, when the birds are just arriving on their wintering grounds.

With a close view, there is a difference between the species in typical bill shape. Some illustrations have shown the Eared Grebe with a conspicuous, perky, upturned bill, which would be a great field mark if it were real. Unfortunately, the difference in bill shape between the two species is subtle, and partly bridged by variation in both species. In direct, close-up comparison, the Eared tends to have a straighter culmen (upper ridge

of upper mandible), with the tip of the lower mandible angling up to meet it. The Horned Grebe tends to have both mandibles tapering more evenly at the tip. The Eared Grebe typically swims with the bill held at a slight downward angle (Horned Grebe often does also), so that any “upturned” effect of the bill itself is cancelled out by the bird’s posture.

Bill color is another point that has been overemphasized. In summer, the Horned Grebe has a noticeable whitish tip on its dark bill, while the Eared Grebe is black-billed at that season. In winter, however, both species have fairly pale gray bills. The Horned still often has a whitish tip on the bill, but this is hardly

visible at a distance.

The plumage pattern of the face and neck is variable in both species, so any simplified description is likely to mislead. Especially in early winter, Horned Grebes may be very gray on the upper neck and may have an extensive dingy wash on the face. Eared Grebes at any time of fall or winter may look surprisingly white-necked and clean-faced. Some Horneds show a big white spot on the lores (which Eared Grebes never have), but this is often faint and sometimes lacking.

One area of the face does show a consistent difference, and that is the region immediately behind the eye. Eared Grebes, even if they look rela-



**Figure 2. Horned Grebes, to show some of the variation in pattern on the head and neck during fall and winter. The white spot on the lores is an excellent field mark when present, but it is faint or lacking on many individuals. In mid- to late-fall, when the species first arrives on the wintering grounds, some individuals can look quite “dirty-faced,” like the**

**figure at lower left. Such birds still show the sharp cutoff behind the eye typical of the species, but even so, they are sometimes misidentified as Eared Grebes. I have not seen individuals as dingy as this in mid-winter, so this may be a characteristic of first-autumn birds.**

tively clean black-and-white, show a downward indentation of blackish or gray into the white cheeks (Figure 1). On the other hand, even on the duller and dingiest Horned Grebes in basic plumage, there is a sharp horizontal line of contrast behind the eye (Figure 2). This difference gives each a characteristic facial expression, and with practice, it can be seen at a great distance. Of course, a Horned Grebe molting out of breeding plumage may have remnants of black in the cheek area; some heavily molting birds might not be identifiable.

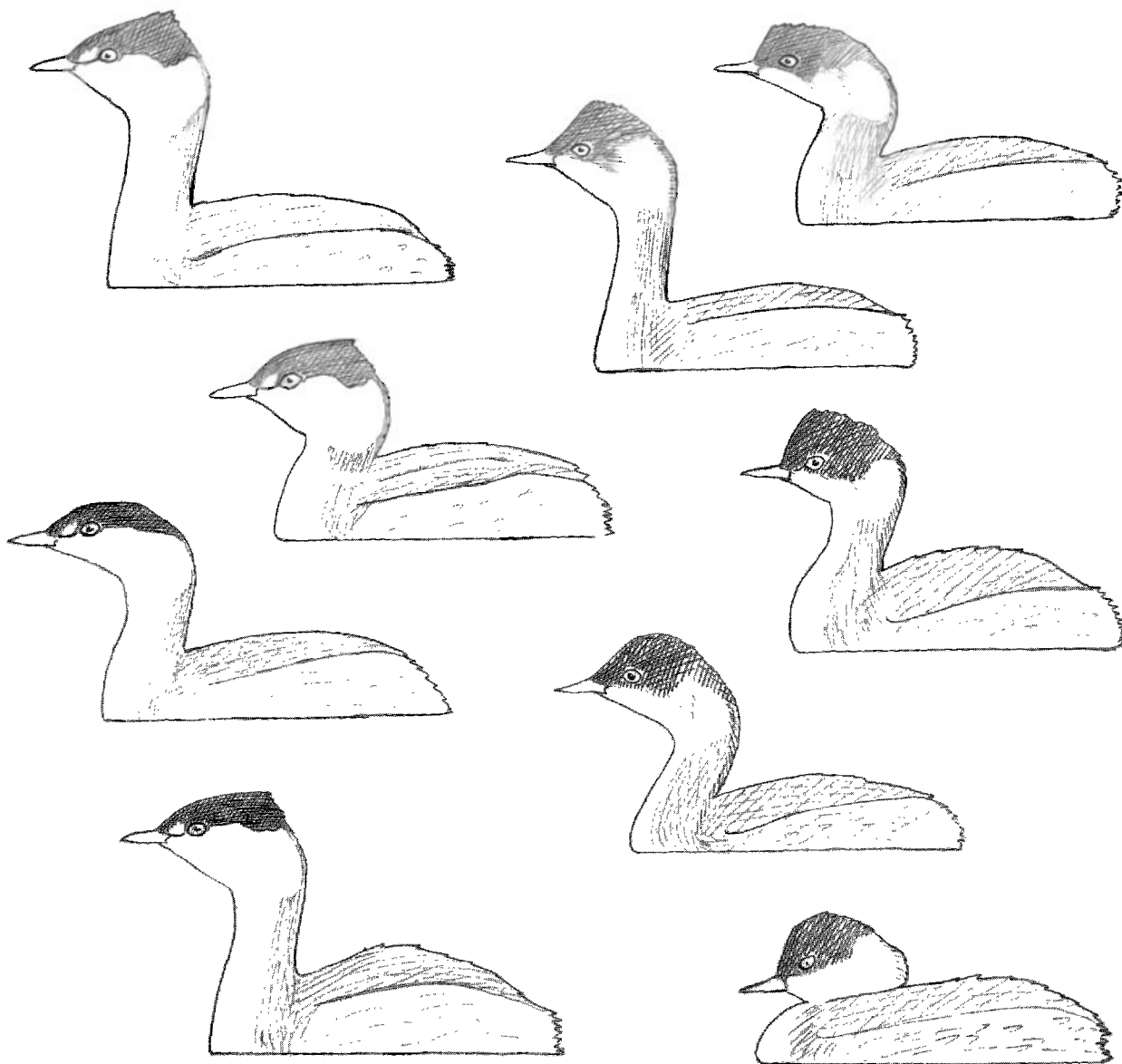
For recognizing distant grebes, shape is also of critical importance, and head shape is the major thing to notice. The head of the Eared Grebe seems to vary in shape from minute

to minute, as the bird raises or sleeks its feathers, but it usually looks different from that of the Horned Grebe. The latter species shows a less changeable head shape.

Other aspects of posture in both grebes can vary widely, depending on the birds' attitude (Figure 3). The neck may be slouched or erect, and it may look thick or thin depending on how much the feathers are fluffed out. Both species usually float high in the water, but either may swim partially submerged at times. The Eared Grebe sometimes looks more “fluffy” at the back end, in the area where a normal bird would have a tail. But this, like other aspects of neck shape and body shape, is far too variable to be a useful field mark. Birders look-

ing at tricky winter grebes should focus on head shape and on the pattern on the face just behind the eye—with a special study of bill shape, if the birds happen to be close enough for that to be visible.

Fall is the season when these two species are most likely to cause confusion. Differences in the average timing of their southward migrations can provide good clues. Over much of the continent, the fall movement of Eared Grebes hits a peak in late September, while Horned Grebes peak in early November, a full six weeks later. Even in those eastern regions where the Eared Grebe is considered rare, any purported “Horned Grebe” seen before mid-October should be scrutinized with great care.



**Figure 3. Sketches of moment-to-moment changes in posture and head shape. Left four birds: Horned Grebes. The top and bottom birds are relatively alert; the third from the top has its feathers sleeked down just before a dive. Right five birds: Eared Grebes. The top bird is in a mildly aggressive posture; the bottom bird is close to the typical sleeping posture. Head shape appears to change more in the Eared Grebe than in**

**the Horned Grebe, possibly indicating longer feathers on the forehead and crown that can be raised and lowered to more different positions. Notice that the bill is usually held very slightly below horizontal in both species, and the difference in bill shape between the two is obscure or difficult to judge at a distance.**

#### **Acknowledgments**

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