

Operation Horned Grebe

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During the week of 4 January 1979 a storm, which originated in the Arctic, struck the Pacific Coast and moved along eastward. On the night of 6 January, following a relatively mild fall and early winter, it struck in the central Appalachian mountain region, causing a blizzard condition to develop. As much as 18" of snow fell, and the temperature dropped to near zero.

A flock of several hundred Horned Grebes (*Colymbus auritus*) was apparently moving southeast toward Chesapeake Bay and open water, when they were caught up in the storm. Sunday, 7 January, phones started ringing at my house. "Operation Horned Grebe" was underway. Probably more than 100 of the birds became confused and — spotting slick highways and mistaking them for open water — landed, stranding themselves on land and in deep snow.

Thanks to our local newspapers, people soon became aware of the plight of these birds and were on the lookout for them. Altogether, I could account for 75 that were picked up and released. Forty-eight came to my house via students from schools and adults calling in or bringing them to me. At one time we had 22 in our stationary tub in the basement. These were calling to each other, rattling the walls with their cries, and apparently enjoying what water we could give them. All of these were weighed (dry) and banded, then reweighed for weight loss the next morning before their release in the Potomac River. I took some of them to schools to show students and to teach them a little about the birds and ecology.

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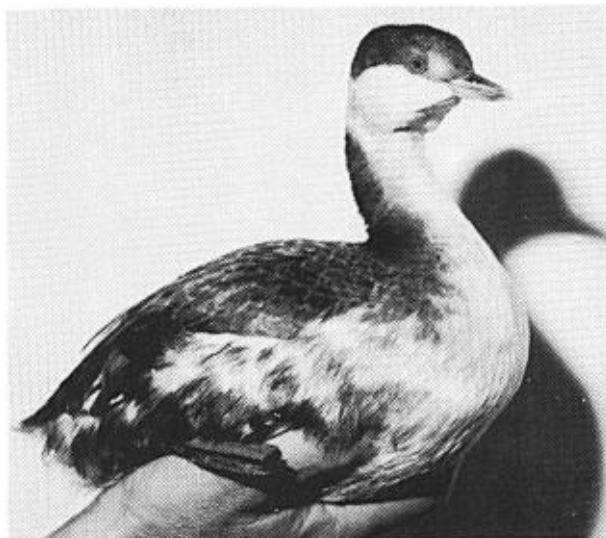
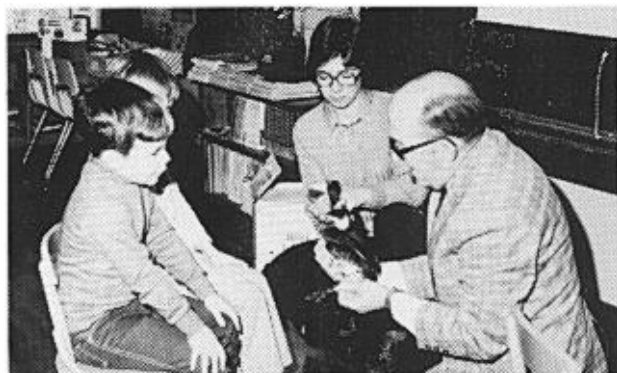


Table 1. Overnight weight loss of Horned Grebes

Date banded	Band number	Dry wt. in grams at 7 pm	Weight following day at 7 am	Weight loss in grams
07 Jan 1979	575-60130	492.0	473.6	18.4
07 Jan 1979	575-60134	392.7	378.45	14.25
07 Jan 1979	575-60135	448.7	430.6	18.1
07 Jan 1979	575-60136	528.2	518.4	9.8
07 Jan 1979	575-60137	445.2	430.4	14.8
08 Jan 1979	575-60147	424.5	417.5	7.0
08 Jan 1979	575-60148	440.4	434.2	6.2
08 Jan 1979	575-60149	493.8	493.8	0.0*
08 Jan 1979	575-60150	522.8	510.6	12.2
08 Jan 1979	575-60153	410.2	401.7	8.5
08 Jan 1979	575-60154	459.2	458.7	0.5
08 Jan 1979	575-60155	485.6	482.7	2.9
08 Jan 1979	575-60156	404.2	396.7	7.5
08 Jan 1979	575-60157	528.5	520.5	8.0
08 Jan 1979	575-60158	437.2	427.1	10.1
08 Jan 1979	575-60159	496.3	487.5	8.8
08 Jan 1979	575-60161	396.2	365.2	31.0*
09 Jan 1979	575-60167	398.6	390.6	8.0
09 Jan 1979	575-60168	419.7	411.5	8.2
09 Jan 1979	575-60169	458.6	450.3	8.3
09 Jan 1979	575-60170	343.9	343.0	0.9
11 Jan 1979	575-60175	457.8	447.2	10.6

* Average weight loss excluding two extremes 9.15 gm
 Average dry weight in grams of all Horned Grebes (47) 453.44 gm
 Heaviest 528.5 gm
 Lightest 327.2 gm

Birds were banded, weighed, and kept overnight in separate boxes, weighed again and placed in tubs of water before releasing.

Inside temperature — 16°C