

NOTES

PIED-BILLED GREBE PREDATION ON A COMMON YELLOWTHROAT

SUSANNE SCHOLZ, P.O. Box 2037, Clearlake, California 95422; susanne.scholz@att.net

FLOYD E. HAYES, Department of Biology, Pacific Union College, 1 Angwin Ave., Angwin, California 94508; floyd_hayes@yahoo.com

The Pied-billed Grebe (*Podilymbus podiceps*) is an opportunistic forager preying on a wide variety of aquatic organisms, including annelids, crustaceans, insects, mollusks, fishes, amphibians, and a snake (e.g., Wetmore 1924, Muller and Storer 1999, Storer 2000, Fjeldså 2004). In addition to live prey, it ingests copious quantities of its own feathers (Wetmore 1924). In this note we report the first observation of a Pied-billed Grebe preying upon a bird.

In the early afternoon of 21 January 2016, Scholz observed a small, plain, yellowish-green songbird along a channel at Lakeside County Park, beside Clear Lake in Lake County, California. The margins of the channel were vegetated with trees and shrubs, and the songbird was foraging in foliage overhanging the water, within 10 cm of the water's surface. After reviewing her bird guide for a few seconds to identify the songbird, a female Common Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis trichas*), Scholz looked back and saw the yellowthroat in the bill of a Pied-billed Grebe. The yellowthroat's head extended out one side of the grebe's bill and the tail and legs out the other side. The grebe maneuvered the yellowthroat so that its head and bill were down the grebe's gullet and it continued to work the yellowthroat down until just the legs and feet were visible, wobbling in the air as if it was still struggling to escape, and then the whole bird was swallowed.

Storer (2000) reviewed the diet of all species of grebes and reported only one feeding on a bird, based on a report by Reed (1925) of the wing of an unidentified coot (*Fulica* sp.) chick found in the stomach of a Great Grebe (*Podiceps major*) collected in Chile. Although the Pied-billed Grebe is much smaller than the Great Grebe, it has a relatively stout bill powered by strong jaw muscles (Zusi and Storer 1969), enabling it to crush hard-bodied crustaceans, especially crayfish, and to break the thorny spines of catfishes (Wetmore 1924, Forbes 1989, Muller and Storer 1999). Some individuals have died, however, from ingesting large prey before subduing it adequately (Behrstock 1981). The Pied-billed Grebe is also known to lunge after flying insects, catching them with its bill (Muller and Storer 1999), and is undoubtedly capable of lunging after small flying birds. Given its morphological adaptations for foraging on relatively large, armored crustaceans and catfishes, it may be more predisposed to prey upon birds than are other species of grebes. Because all grebes frequently ingest their own feathers, which are eventually ejected as pellets, presumably to protect the stomach from sharp fish bones, to clean the stomach of indigestible material, or to eliminate gastric parasites (Fjeldså 2004), preying upon a bird would provide an abundant source of feathers. Nevertheless, foraging on small birds by any species of grebe is probably a very rare, opportunistic event.

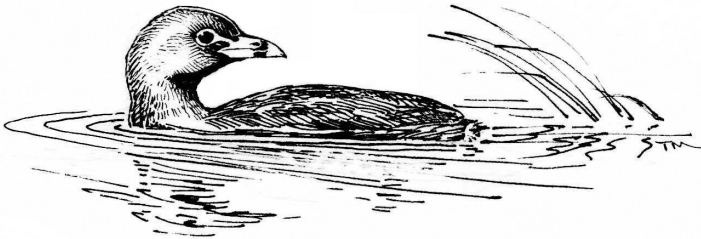
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Pied-billed Grebe

Sketch by Tim Manolis