

PENNSYLVANIA BIRDS

2469 Hammertown Road
Narvon, PA 17555-9726
(215) 445-9609

March 30, 1991

RE: P.O.R.C Record # 010/010a-01-1987
(Western/Clark's Grebe)

This record is being recirculated because of additional information submitted by another observer, Dave Dereamus (See attached).

However, in light of this I feel it is important that the enclosed photographs of an unusual plumaged Horned Grebe (taken at Lake Somerset on the same day as the other reported sightings) also be taken into consideration when reviewing this record. Please note how well the drawing matches the pattern and coloration in the photographs.

Also remember that birds viewed through a scope will appear larger than birds seen in the same field that are closer. Dave does not indicate clearly if the loons or the grebe were closer.



Franklin C. Haas

010-01-1988

P.S. You may have already heard of a Western Grebe sighting on Lake Somerset on Nov. 1 - 3. I first spotted this bird while leading an educational waterfowl tour from PNR, with about 15 people attending. It was the last bird seen by our group on Nov 1 in the late afternoon. Someone in the group originally identified it as a loon from a distance, and accepting that I nonetheless put the scope on it for everyone in the group to see one last bird before ending the tour. On looking through the scope, I saw what I instantly took to be a Western Grebe. I passed the scope to the only other experienced birders in the group, Mike and Evaleen Watko, who concurred with my identification. There followed considerable excitement as I explained to the group the rare nature of the bird in view, and most everyone got a look before the bird began swimming away from us. We piled in our cars and drove to the next parking area which we expected the grebe would be passing. We were not disappointed, as the grebe swam steadily our way. With two scopes set up, everyone had the chance to take long looks at the bird. I confess that I did less watching and more letting the group watch, while I explained to them about the bird and about the procedure that follows any such rare bird sighting. To make a long story somewhat shorter, we watched the bird for more than a half hour and at one time saw in in close enough proximity to a loon to get the impression that the grebe was more than half as large as the loon. But I must say that since there was no doubt in my mind as to the identity of the grebe, and since I was in the position of leading a program, I did not take the time to make notes, mental or otherwise, about the birds features (I did however take the time to determine that the grebe was a dark phase (Western) individual, although in mixing the forms up in my mind I first reported it as a Clark's Grebe).

Again, with no uncertainty in my mind, upon returning to PNR, I called as many birders as I could to alert them to the presence of the grebe. Bob L. and several other people (including Frank and Barb Haas from eastern PA) made plans to drive to the lake the next morning. I likewise went to the lake. Again, to make a long story short, the only grebe that any of us could find on the lake, and this grebe was near the same area where the Western was originally spotted; was a winter plumaged Horned Grebe, the only imaginable look alike for a Western if one's size scale was way off. I would not have been concerned for the possibility of size distortion in this case except for the fact that several very experienced birders first identified the Horned Grebe as a Red-necked Grebe! As my mind played wonderful tricks on me, I left the lake have lost some measure of confidence about my record, and a little embarrassed at the possibility that I might have made such a gross misidentification! In actuality, it was the first impression of both myself and the Watkos (who remember saw the grebe with me the day before) that the Red-necked turned Horned Grebe certainly was not the bird that we had seen the day before. But, then again, the coincidence seemed terrific that the Western had left to be replaced by a single Horned Grebe which we had not seen as a group the day before.

I called Barb Haas, editor of the new Pennsylvania Birds, to tell her that I thought it best, in light of the fact that the bird could not be rediscovered, to withdraw the record. At this she informed me that two birders who had arrived at the lake after we had left reported having seen a Western Grebe, and one of the observers had had considerable experience with the species. I got a report that another person also saw it that day,

and that at least two people saw it on Nov. 3, including Paul Scwalbe, one of the PABBA coordinators.

That's about it. No pictures, and, consequently, at least in my mind, still some doubt. One other little coincidence that you no doubt have or will hear about - there was a sighting of a Western Grebe at Presque Isle about two or three weeks prior to the Lake Somerset sighting.

Anyway, the Lake Somerset bird would be only the third or fourth record of the species for the state, would be the first southwestern PA record, and might be the first state record that has involved a Western Grebe identified to form. My inclination, which goes against my gut feeling, is to let the record go unreported. I have, however, not spoken with any of the other observers who are supposed to have sighted the bird, and perhaps one of these could provide convincing details.

DJM.

Dave DeReamus 010/0102
2090 Hidden Drive
Bath, PA 18014
(215) 759-8772

To: P.O.R.C.

Dear Frank and Barb,

It has recently come to my attention that there is major confusion about "the Grebe" seen on Lake Somerset in early November of 1987. In order to clear up (or add to) the confusion, here is my eyewitness account of the bird.

Bernie Morris and I arrived at Lake Somerset on the morning of 11/2/87. We were looking for a reported Clark's Grebe which would be not only a great state bird for me, but also a lifer. We stopped at the dam breast in order to scope the lake. Near the middle of the lake, with some loons, was a striking black-and-white bird. Our distance from it, however, was too far to note any details. After talking it over, we decided to head for the eastern shore of the lake. This would get us closer and also put the sun at our backs. We went up Route 281 to about where we thought the bird was located. We parked at a farmhouse and carefully bulled our way through the thornbushes that grew among the conifers along the lakeshore. We finally reached the lake's edge and found the bird to be right out in front of us. My estimation was that it was about 100 yards offshore. It was diving among a few Common Loons which we immediately noticed to be only a bit larger than the bird. Using my Swift 15-60x Scope, we were able to note the following:

The bird had a swan-like neck, pure white in front and on the sides with a very thin black trailing edge down the back of the neck. The bill was very long, bright yellowish in color throughout, and extremely pointed at the tip caused by a thinning of the lower mandible. It had the "stabbing" appearance of an Anhinga's bill. We were convinced at this point that it could only be either a Western or Clark's Grebe.

For at least the next 20 minutes, we studied the head pattern, discovering the following: The cheeks were snow white. The black cap on the head extended down the back of the neck into a thin line. It also narrowed towards the forehead and met near the top of the bill. The top of the red eye just barely met the bottom edge of the dark forehead. There was no white visibly separating the eye from the black although the entire eye was

definitely in the white part of the face. Our confusion came from the fact that very few guides showed the two recently split species and the ones that did (National Geographic, etc.), did not depict exactly what we were seeing. The dark phase, or Western, was shown as having the black going below the eye; but this was not the case. The light phase, or Clark's, was shown as having the white going over the eye or entirely surrounding it. While this was close to our bird's pattern, it was not entirely agreeable. There was very minimal flecking between the eye and the bill; but this was only visible at a higher power. The back and sides of the bird were studied. The top of the back was darker than the flanks, but no conclusions could be made. At this point, we were both convinced that we were observing either a Clark's Grebe or one of the rare Western/Clark's intergrades!

I had seen the Western Grebe in California and remembered the eye being completely enveloped in black. Reexamining a slide of this CA bird confirmed this. Since seeing the PA bird, I have also seen numerous Western and Clark's Grebes in Colorado. Both of these species were seen on the same reservoir, so their different head patterns could be easily studied. Of the birds I saw, the Western's all had the black surrounding the eye and the Clark's all were surrounded by white. The bill colors were also different as noted in the National Geographic Guide. The PA bird's bill color was hard to pin down due to the changing hues as it turned in the bright sun. It was not a brilliant yellow-orange nor was it a dull yellow-green. It appeared to be, as mentioned before, a bright yellowish color. Bernie took a few pictures with a 400 mm lens, but the bird was too far away to discern any field marks.

I have since heard reports of other birders finding a Horned and/or Red-Necked Grebe while looking for "the" bird. These may very well be true, also; but the bird we saw could, in no way, have been either of these. It's close proximity to the Common Loons would have made a Horned

Grebe diminutive in comparison. Our bird was somewhat smaller, but close to, the loons' size. In addition, the head was held much higher than the loons'. This bird also had a clean white pair of cheeks, throat, and neck. There were no dusky or grayish parts on this bird as in those of a Red-Necked Grebe. The bill was not blunted or dingy-colored at all, and the red eye color also ruled out any possibility of this being a Red-Necked.

I spoke on the telephone with Paul Schwalbe about this. He said that he and his wife both saw the bird from the boat dock, located on the western side of the lake. He told me that their only question about the bird was that they weren't close enough to determine whether it was a Western or a Clark's Grebe! They had ruled out all other grebes.

Your January-March 1989 issue asked for records on the Western Grebe, but nothing about the Clark's. I am interested in knowing any or all information on this bird since it affects both my state and life lists. Does anyone know who originally reported it as a Clark's Grebe?

Please let me know what you've heard.

Good birding,

Dave DeRemus

P.S. Also enclosed is a rough sketch of the bird.

On another note: My wife was curious to know if you got her two sketches during your move from place to place?

P.S. - Below is my best attempt at a sketch that shows
the eye position on the head in relation to
the black cap and forehead.

Clark's (?) Grebe on Lake Somerset

11/2/87



? 010-0A-19887
011

17 February 1988

PENNSYLVANIA BIRDS
769 East Forge Rd.
Media, Pa 19063

Dear Barb and Frank:

Glenna and I were not aware of any confusion about the identification of the Western/Clark's Grebe(s) seen this past fall in Pennsylvania by those who saw the bird(s). However, we cannot speak to the sighting reported from Erie since we heard very little about it and have spoken to no one who saw that bird.

When Bill Reid called to tell us about the sighting in Luzerne County, he told us how they saw that particular bird and the field marks he noted to identify the bird. Glenna and I saw the bird at Lake Somerset and later were able to compare notes with Bernie Morris who also saw this bird.

→ The identifying features related by both Bill Reid and Bernie Morris not only eliminated other loons and grebes, but described each bird in question as the Clark's as opposed to the Western Grebe.

Any controversy about these sightings seems to revolve around whether or not such a bird should be able to be found again after a given period of time, rather than if the bird was identified correctly.

We all know that the time to find waterfowl is when a storm has hit an area, since storms not only seem to force them out of the air but also usually keeps them down on the water. Thus the fact that there were no major weather systems involved with the sightings supports the possibility of the birds moving around rather than their not moving around. In spite of this one would expect the birds to remain more than one day, and at least one of them did. Of course in each case we don't know how long the birds were present before they were found, so they could have been present for several days.

If their not being found on a following day is odd, let us relate our experience at Lake Somerset, which is really weird. Glenna and I arrived at Lake Somerset shortly after 7:00 a.m. on 3 November 1987, which was two days after we received the message that the bird was there. We first stopped in a parking lot by a cove on the western side of the lake. All we could find from here were a few Pied-billed Grebes and a Common Loon or two. We then went to the dam near the lake maintenance buildings, and from this vantage point found the bird against the edge of the lake backed by a hill and woodland. The bird was very obviously a Western/Clark's type, but was too far away to be able to detail the finer field marks with ease, even with a scope. We noted landmarks and drove along the western

shore of the lake until we came to a parking/boat landing area.

From this location which was directly across the lake from where the bird had been, we stopped and looked for it but in vain. It just wasn't there! We could see almost all parts of the lake from this location, and saw the Pied-billed Grebes again, at least four to five Common Loons, a Horned Grebe far up the lake to the left and a duck or two. But no large Grebe. We searched the whole area, sweeping back and forth with binoculars and scope, concentrating on where the bird had been. After about an hour, and about ready to give up seeing it again, we walked out on a long concrete boat landing that projects out into the lake. We set up the scope and immediately found the bird in the very area across the lake where we had been searching. Where the bird had been for the hour or so we don't know. We never saw it dive or fly, there was no brush on the waters edge where it could have hidden, it just wasn't there. This hiatus was quite baffling to us and is still hard to explain.

We now had the bird in our glasses and scope. Glenna and I have the habit of quizzing each other about a birds field marks, first without a field guide, then with a field guide, when viewing an important bird such as a lifer or a new state bird like this one. We both had seen Western/Clark's Grebes several times before. I saw my first on 6 June 1949 and she saw her first on 8 July 1969.

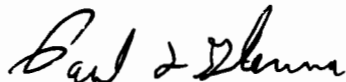
I was elated when I saw the large yellow bill, because I felt that this was the best diagnostic mark to look for. Glenna was especially impressed with how shallow the black cap was. Of course the location of the eye was important. Fortunately a Common Loon appeared in the scope in the same field with the grebe, so we had a good size comparison. The body of the grebe was at least half the length of the body of the loon if not a little better, and they passed quite close together.

We can now look back on the identification with confidence because of the body size and our seeing the long yellow bill. We had a cloudy sky and very little wind, so we had good lighting and the water was quite smooth.

There is no doubt that events like this one illustrates the need for a Penna. records committee. I would support the establishment of such a committee whole heartily. It would not only help keep the records clean but would establish guidelines for observers in the field of what they should do to have acceptable evidence for any unusual observations. A records committee would also remove the burden from the editors of any publication- local, state or national; of having to pass judgement on such cases, which is never easy.

However, in order to be accepted by the birders throughout the state, such a committed would have to be established on a recognized authoritative base. No doubt a state-wide ornithological association of some sort would be the best vehicle for this. I'm not sure how it could be done otherwise. We have talked about a state-wide ornithological organization at our atlasing meetings, and we certainly would like to see one materialize in the near future.

Sincerely



Paul & Glenna Schwalbe

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round #2 of 2

Species: **Western/Clark's Grebe**

Date of Sighting: **November 1 - 3, 1987**

Observer(s): **R. Mulvihill, P. Schwalbe, D. Dereamus**

Date of Submission: **1990 Somerset**

Submitted by: **R. Mulvihill, P. Schwalbe, D. Dereamus**

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V		
					A	B	C
E. Kwater			X				
B. Haas							X
F. Haas							X
R. Leberman				X			
G. McWilliams		X					
S. Santner				X			
P. Schwalbe		X					
TOTALS		2	1	2			2
DECISION				X			

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

P. Schwalbe

Date:

8-15-91

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of 2

Species: Western/Clark's Grebe

Date of Sighting: 11/01/87 - 11/03/87

Observer(s): Robert Mulvihill, Paul Sch^walbe

Date of Submission: 1989

Submitted by: Robert Mulvihill, Paul Schwalbe

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V		
					A	B	C
E. Kwater			X				
B. Haas							X
F. Haas							X
R. Leberman						X	
G. McWilliams			X				
S. Santner							X
P. Schwalbe		X					
TOTALS		1	2			1	3
DECISION					—————		

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

Paul Schwalbe

Date: 12-26-89