

The Nesting of the Black-throated Grebe (*Podiceps ruficollis*) at Blackwood.

By Edwin Ashby.

A pair of these charming little water birds appeared on our reservoir at "Wittunga," Blackwood, at the end of August or early in September, 1931. In October we noticed that one of the birds, we think both, although not working together, was carrying bits of water weed in its beak, and would disappear in a clump of bulrushes, that at that time when the reservoir was full, stood well away from the land. The rushes were comparatively short, at the early part of the season none

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standing more than two feet out of the water. We could not see exactly where the birds placed the bits of weed, but it only took a few moments for the bird to bring its contribution and be back again searching for another scrap of weed. The track taken by the bird through the rushes was almost always the same, and formed a distinct water pathway through the reeds. Later on only one bird was to be seen during the day, and sometimes it was joined by its mate in early morning or evening. Whenever I was near the water's edge the single watcher directly it caught sight of me would rapidly swim from where it happened to be till it was quite near to me, and the rich chestnut-colored patches on the neck were easily seen. Later on in November, or near Christmas, the male and the female were both to be seen, and we concluded the time for incubation was ended, but no young were to be seen at any time of the day. The larger bird, which we assumed was the male, continued to keep a close watch, staying most of the time on that side of the water that was near the pumping house, while the smaller bird, no doubt the female (the color markings were similar), frequented that part of the water most distant from the pump. The action of both birds was evidently to attract our interest, and when they had got our attention and were quite close to us, they would both feed, preen their feathers, and stretch out their wings in a most unconcerned manner. So marked was this, that it certainly showed the birds were consumed with anxiety that we should not guess that they had "household cares" hidden in the reeds. One day I had my field-glass and was the better able to watch this behaviour. On going to the edge of the water I noticed that both the birds were feeding on the far side of the reservoir, but on catching sight of the intruder, the male was the first to take note, both commenced swimming towards me. The reeds in which the nest had been placed were between the birds and myself. The male bird came the shortest way, rounding the reeds, and commenced to feed and preen its feathers close to me, whereas the hen bird took a longer route and kept the reeds between us, but with the aid of the field-glass I noted that she turned into the reeds at about two-thirds of the way, and as she came in my direction I noticed her stop for a moment, stretch out her long neck towards a little brown patch at the base of the reed-stems, and then she came through and out on my side and joined her mate in unconcernedly feeding and preening her feathers. Can it be that the little brown patch was a cluster of fledglings, and that the little stop and stretching of the neck was the outward

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evidence of some private communication to her young? How little we know of the means employed of communicating with one another, that is used by our feathered friends, but that they do in some measure communicate their thoughts and wishes, to me seems certain. By the 23rd January, 1932, we had seen nothing of any fledglings and had practically come to the conclusion that rats must have taken the eggs or the young, and that the pair, as far as this season is concerned, were childless. On the 24th January there were still two Grebes on the water, one the adult male, and one active brown fledgling about one-third grown. For the next few weeks these two have been only seen. At first on anyone appearing at the water's edge both birds rapidly paddled out into the middle or far side of the water, the old bird keeping between us and the baby. It was most charming to watch the little fellow gradually becoming efficient in avoiding danger, diving and keeping out of harm's way. At first the adult bird gave about one out of every three "sweet morsels" to its young, but later on the young learnt to supply its ample needs on its own without assistance from the parent bird. A few days before the 4th March I noticed the adult bird stretching his wings and flapping them and doing it for a score of times without a stop; the thought crossed my mind at once that he was preparing his muscles for leaving, and sure enough on the 4th March he had gone, and the now large fledgling was left by himself; on the 10th March, the chick now fully two-thirds grown, had also departed. In conclusion—this is the first time we have noted this Grebe on our reservoir and their presence with their graceful movements and friendly attention has been a source of constant interest, and I have much regretted that lack of time has prevented the taking of more observations. The length of time during which the parents kept the young absolutely hidden is quite new to me. I am inclined to think that more than one young probably were hatched, but with the constant pumping and gravitation of the water in the orchard the reeds in which the nest was placed were left high and dry. The length of time since the preparation of the nest suggests the possibility that the first clutch of eggs may have been destroyed. Cormorants and Herons often are to be seen there searching for food. In such case the final chick would be the sole survivor of a second brood. We greatly hope that the mother Grebe met with no mishap, and that, in spite of the drawback of the rapid lowering of the water level, the single chick successfully reared will encourage the parents to visit us next spring.