

Grebes as Feather-eaters.

[By F. R. ZIEITZ.]

Contribution from the S.A. Museum.

In domestic poultry feather-eating is considered due to a craving for flesh food and is common during the moulting season when the new feathers are coming, some birds being plucked almost naked. When once this habit is acquired they will eat every small feather they can find.

In the case of grebes, feathers seem to constitute a portion of their regular diet. The first case which came under my notice was an Australian Tippet Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus christiani*) which was sent to the Museum as a "feather-eater" by Mr. F. Stacey of Wellington West, S.A. Upon examining the stomach I found it to contain a ball of grebe feathers, portions of quills of feathers partly digested, remains of water weeds, and what appeared to be frog's spawn.

On writing to Mr. Stacey for further particulars as to whether the birds plucked the feathers out of themselves or other individuals, or whether they picked them up during the moulting season, I received the following information from him:—"I have been fishing on the River Murray and Lake Alexandrina for over twenty-one years; the habits and food of birds have always been of much interest to me. I have known for many years that grebes eat feathers, and have examined many of their stomachs. They spend most of their time under the water in the quiet backwaters, where feathers float on the surface till they become thoroughly saturated and sink. I feel quite safe in saying that the feathers are not eaten until they have been submerged long enough to be in the first stage of decomposition. These birds eat not only feathers of their own kind, but I have found their stomachs to contain those of the Zebra or Pink-eared Duck (*Malacorhynchus membranaceus*), the Freckled Duck (*Stictonetta naevosa*), and the Teal (*Virago sp.*).

Although the grebes eat a great many feathers and spend the greater part of their life under water, they are always fat; domestic cats will eat them in preference to other birds. The Dabchick or Hoary-headed Grebe (*Poliiocephalus poliocephalus*) also eats feathers, but not to the same extent as the former species." In regard to the Hoary-headed Grebe I might

mention that out of three specimens lately received at the Museum, two of them had feathers in their stomachs, whilst the third specimen contained only remains of insects.

Seehbohm* states in reference to the Great-crested Grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*):—"Its food is entirely procured in the water, and consists of water beetles and other aquatic insects, small fish, small frogs, and mollusks. The seeds and slender shoots of aquatic plants are also found in its stomach; but instead of small stones and gravel, numbers of its own feathers plucked from the ventral region are mixed with its food. It is not known that this curious habit, which is more or less common to all the grebes, is intended to assist digestion, but it has been remarked by many ornithologists in widely different localities—Naumann (father and son), Meves (father and son), Yarrell, Thompson, Macgillivray, etc."

* Seehbohm's "British Birds," Vol. III., p. 456.
