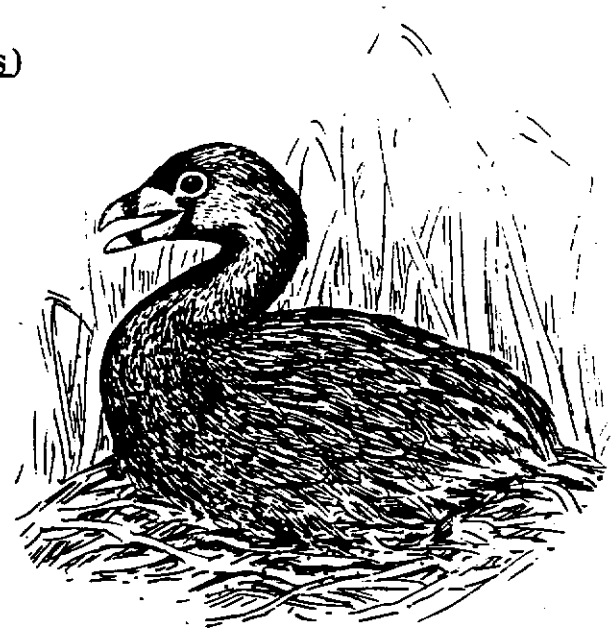
Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program
Division of Fisheries & Wildlife
Route 135
Westborough, MA 01581
(508)792-7270, ext. 200

MASSACHUSETTS RARE AND ENDANGERED WILDLIFE

Pied-billed Grebe
(Podilymbus podiceps)

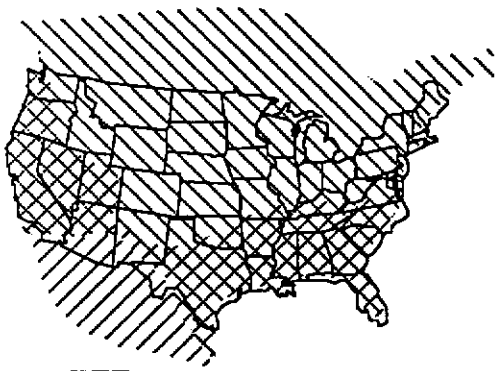


Charles Joslin, from DeGraaf, R. and Rudis, D. New England Wildlife, 1983

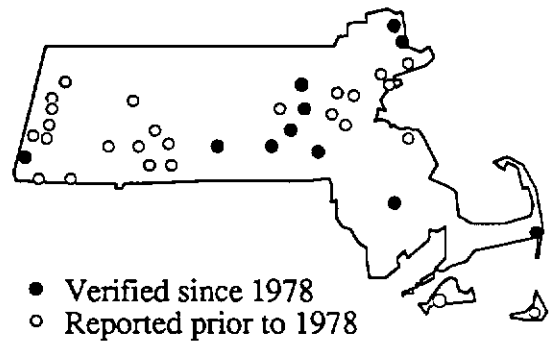
DESCRIPTION: Pied-billed Grebes are stocky waterbirds, 30 to 38 cm (12 to 15 in.) in length, with short legs far back on the body, short wings, a short tail, flat lobes on the toes, and a stout, thick, chicken- like bill. The plumage of the Pied-billed Grebe changes with the seasons. During the summer, the bird is uniformly brown with a dusky underside, a fluffy white posterior, and a large black patch on the throat; its bill is bluish-white, encircled near the middle by a black band. During the winter, the throat loses its black patch, and the bill becomes yellowish, with no black band. The young are liberally banded with black and white stripes, with a smattering of reddish-brown spots. The call of the Pied-billed Grebe is only given during the breeding season, and resembles a series of "*cow cow cow* " sounds. They are poor fliers and must run across the water for several yards before becoming airborne; the head is held low during flight.

SIMILAR SPECIES: Pied-billed Grebes can be distinguished from all other grebes by the lack of white wing patches in flight, the chicken-like bill, and, in summer, the black band around the bill.

(continued overleaf)



Winter range
Summer (breeding) range
Year-round range



• Verified since 1978
○ Reported prior to 1978

Massachusetts Distribution by Town

1990

HABITAT IN MASSACHUSETTS: Pied-billed Grebes prefer to nest in marshes, lakes, large ponds, and other wetlands which have an abundant supply of cattails, reeds, and other vegetation which can provide cover and nesting materials. They spend the winter in open lakes and rivers, estuaries, and tidal creeks, usually to the south of Massachusetts.

RANGE: The Pied-billed Grebe is the most widespread species of grebe in North America. Pied-billed Grebes can be found from southern Canada southward through the U.S., Central America, and South America to Argentina. The northern populations (including those in Massachusetts) migrate in autumn to the northern limit of unfrozen fresh water south to Panama. Some of the birds may be found in saltwater marshes if there is no unfrozen fresh water available.

BEHAVIOR/LIFE HISTORY: Pied-billed Grebes arrive in Massachusetts in late March and begin courtship displays, which consist of diving and chasing, bill touching, circling, and calling; this may continue until June, but nesting is usually initiated in late April. The nest is constructed over a period of 3 to 7 days by both the male and female out of decayed reeds, sedges, grasses, and other vegetation. It is normally located in thick vegetation near to or surrounded by open water, which allows the birds to travel to and from the nest underwater and undetected. The territory of the breeding pair usually comprises the area within 46 meters (150 ft.) of the nest; the pair's home range is about twice this area. Grebes are very shy during the breeding and nesting periods. When alarmed or disturbed, they sink slowly beneath the water and surface again a considerable distance away, often in an area of dense vegetation.

Egg-laying occurs from late April to June; 2 to 10 whitish-blue eggs are laid over a period of several days. The eggs are covered with debris whenever both parents leave the nest, so the egg color gradually changes to a dirty brown. Both parents (but usually the female) incubate the eggs for 23 to 24 days. The chicks are precocial and can swim and dive only hours after emerging from their shells, but they tire quickly. They often climb onto their parents' backs regardless of whether they are in the water or on the nest. The chicks follow their parents everywhere, constantly begging for food. They grow rapidly and are capable of flight in less than a month.

Pied-billed Grebes eat a variety of foods, including aquatic vegetation, seeds, frogs, tadpoles, fish, aquatic insects, and especially crayfish. Pied-billed Grebes begin to migrate south from Massachusetts in September (sometimes late August), and most of them are gone by the end of December. Considerable numbers of Pied-billed Grebes from farther north can sometimes be seen in Massachusetts as they migrate south. Pied-billed Grebes are infrequently found in Massachusetts in mid-winter.

POPULATION STATUS: The Pied-billed Grebe is classified as a Threatened Species in Massachusetts due to the limited amount of suitable wetland habitats and the small population size of the birds. Nesting occurs erratically at some of the known breeding sites: a pair may breed at a suitable location one year and then never return again. Despite the small amount of available habitat, many of these areas are left vacant by the Pied-billed Grebes.