

# Small Winter Grebe ID

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The identification of most Horned and Eared Grebes in basic (winter) plumage is straight forward, but a few individuals are difficult to separate. Here we discuss the fine points of telling those tricky birds apart.

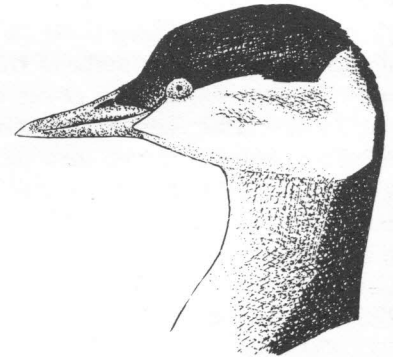
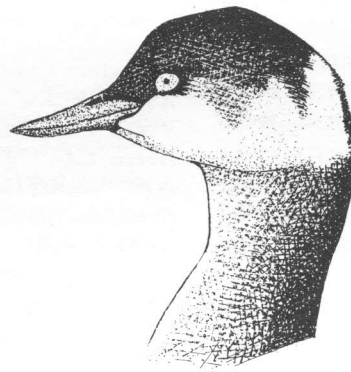
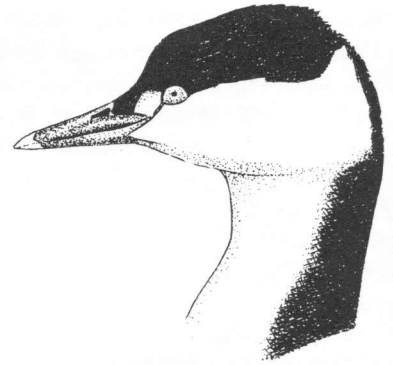
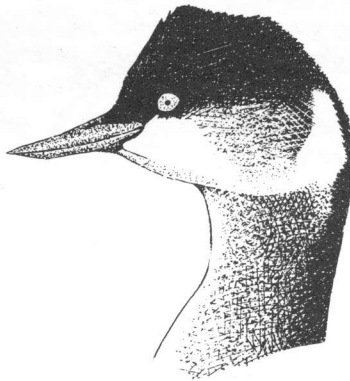
**Status:** The Horned Grebe is a locally common migrant. It is a rare breeder in northern Ontario. The Eared Grebe is an increasingly regular but very rare migrant. It is casual in summer. Eared first nested in Ontario in 1996.

**Jizz:** Compared with the Horned Grebe, typical Eared shows a thinner neck, a more triangular head shape and a thinner bill that is uptilted at the tip. Eared usually has a much higher and downy "fluffed butt" appearance. Eared also appears to have brighter red eyes that are visible at a greater distance. Many young Eared Grebes in the fall have more yellow instead of red eyes.

**Identification:** A typical Horned Grebe (top right) has a black crown that extends down only to the lower side of the eye where it gives way abruptly to white on the face. Most of the face and neck is white. A typical Eared (top left) has more extensive dark on the head that extends below and behind the eyes and onto the ear region. The transition from black to white on the head is gradual and the ear coverts are gray not white. The neck is more extensively gray in most Eared (Godfrey 1986).

**Pitfalls:** Some young Eared Grebes (bottom left) in the fall show less upturn to the bill tip, leading to confusion with Horned. Also, diving Eared with sleeked head feathers can look deceptively large billed. A few young Eared Grebes in the fall retain the juvenile's buff tinged upper neck which may look reddish (bottom left), leading some to think that they are seeing a Horned Grebe with remnants of alternate (breeding) plumage. Some Eared Grebes show both of the above characters. Occasionally, a young Horned Grebe (bottom right) in the fall has dusky mottling on the sides of the face and neck, leading to confusion with Eared. Conversely, the odd Eared has a whiter neck than usual. Finally, a Horned Grebe molting from alternate to basic plumage in the early fall or from basic to alternate in the spring might be called an Eared.

**Fine Points:** If you still are not sure whether it is a Horned or an Eared, look at the tip of the bill. Horned (top and bottom right) normally has a distinct whitish tip to the bill on both mandibles, which the Eared lacks. Also look for a big pale loreal spot (between the eyes and the bill) that is found on many Horned Grebes (top right), but it is lacking in Eared. These features are best seen at close range. *The most confusing birds necessitate concentration on the division of black and white immediately behind the eye. The division is sharp and horizontal on Horned. The Eared shows "a downward indentation of blackish or gray into the white cheeks"* (Kaufman 1992).



Typical Eared (top left) and Horned (top right) Grebes in full basic plumage. Confusing juvenal/first basic Eared (bottom left) and Horned (bottom right) Grebes by Michael King

**Habitat:** Migrant Eared Grebes prefer more sheltered habitats than Horned such as a bays, harbours and small lakes. If you see a Horned Grebe at a sewage lagoon, it is probably an Eared!

**Migration:** Eared Grebes migrate somewhat earlier in the fall than Horned, beginning in August. A bird before mid-September in southern Ontario is likely an Eared Grebe.

#### Literature Cited

Godfrey, W.E. 1986. The Birds of Canada. National Museums of Canada, Ottawa.

Kaufman, K. 1992. The Practiced Eye: Identifying the Monochrome Grebes in Winter. American Birds 46 (5):1187-1190.

#### Taverner Cup 1998

On Saturday 30 May, Mike Runtz, Peter Burke, Doug McRae, Colin Jones and a designated driver won the 1998 Taverner Cup with 171 species. Mike attributes the team's success to their strategy of seeking out breeding species and sticking to a strict time schedule. In second place were the 1997 winners: Bruce Di Labio, Chris Traynor, Richard Brouillet and driver, Andre Charron. This year 13 teams competed with more expected next year.