



# Black-necked Grebe

## Local Biodiversity Action Plan

### Black-necked Grebe (*Podiceps nigricollis*)



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### Ecology

#### Appearance

The black-necked grebe is so called due to the black colouring of their head and neck. In summer it has golden tufts of feathers on its face that contrast with its black head and neck. However in winter it is very pale with only a slight black cap and the golden tufts are not present making it harder to identify. The males and females are of similar size with an average length of 28-34cm and a wingspan of 52-55cm. The weight of black-necked grebes can vary widely from 200-735g.

#### Habitat

Black-necked grebes inhabit small lochs, reservoirs, gravel marl pits and estuaries.

#### Food

Black-necked grebes eat insects, small fishes and crustaceans.

#### Life Style

Black-necked grebes are excellent swimmers and divers however they cannot walk very well and so nest on the water's edge. Nesting occurs between June and July and usually two to three eggs are laid. Young grebes are often carried on the adults back.



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On cold, sunny mornings like other grebe species, the black-necked grebe sunbathes by raising its rump and facing away from the sun. This exposes dark underlying skin to the light.

The unhatched chicks communicate with the adults by using a 'care-soliciting signal.' The peeping of the embryo prompts the adult black-necked grebes to turn the eggs more, build up the nest mound, bring food to the nest and spend more time incubating the egg.

## Current status

A rare breeding species in the UK, the national population fluctuates between 30 and 50 pairs annually. The number of birds peaked in the late 1990s but nationally the number of sites occupied and number of pairs seems to be returning to levels of the mid 1990s (Holling and RBBP, 2010). It is unclear why this is happening. The region was colonised in the early 1980s and Cheshire and neighbouring Greater Manchester now holds up to 20% of the UK breeding population.

Various natural meres and shallow, man made water bodies, characterised by substantial areas of emergent and floating vegetation, have the potential to be colonised by breeding black-necked grebes in the future. The wintering grounds of the northwest England breeding population are currently unknown. This species currently breeds at one main site, Woolston Eyes with sporadic breeding at other sites.

The colony at Woolston Eyes has fluctuated in size over the past ten years (1998-2007) from a peak of 20 pairs in 2001 (36 adults in May and 20 pairs raising over 20 young) to around 14 pairs in 2007 (Holling and RBBP 2010). However, this is still the largest breeding colony in the UK (Martin & Smith, 2007). In Europe, pairs regularly lay three eggs and raise three young but in Cheshire the productivity rarely exceeds 1.5 young per pair.

Black-necked grebes are afforded special protection at all times under Schedule 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and is Amber listed in the Birds of Conservation Concern 3 (2009) due to its UK rarity (breeding population less than 300 pairs and non-breeding less than 900 individuals).

## Threats

- Draining of natural wetlands.
- Lack of positive management. Many of the region's man made wetlands are often ephemeral in nature. Unless managed, open water and emergent aquatic communities dry out through natural succession and develop into damp, willow scrub.



## Threats continued

- Loss of man made wetlands to developmental pressures, i.e. landfill, new housing.
- Sensitivity to disturbance in the breeding season. The increase in recreational activities such as angling and sailing has reduced the numbers of sites suitable for this species.
- Low breeding success at certain sites requires further study.
- Restriction to a few isolated sites leaves the population vulnerable to chance events.
- Predation.
- The long-term future of the Number 3 deposit bed at Woolston Eyes is still uncertain and could be threatened by new pumping of canal sewage.
- Potential long term loss of main site due to operational nature of site.
- Need for replacement habitat
- Industrial development of Shell Pool
- Sludge pumping at Woolston Eyes
- Predation by unknown predators

## How are we helping to conserve the Black-necked Grebe in the Cheshire region?

- A North West England Black-necked Grebe study group has been monitoring the species for a number of years.
- Site occupancy, population levels and breeding success are recorded in an annual monitoring report.
- Liaison with other black-necked grebe monitoring groups elsewhere in the UK.
- RSPB undertaking national study of preferred habitat requirements.

## Objectives, targets and actions

The objectives, targets and actions to help conserve the Black-necked Grebe in the Cheshire region can be found on the [Biodiversity Action Reporting System \(BARS\)](#) along with full details of our progress so far.



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### How to find out more about Black-necked Grebes

Visit the RSPB website - [www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/b/blackneckedgrebe/index.aspx](http://www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguide/name/b/blackneckedgrebe/index.aspx)

### Contact details

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North West England Black-necked Grebe Study Group

### References and Glossary

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[http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Eared\\_Grebe.html](http://www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/BirdGuide/Eared_Grebe.html)

