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A Bird Lost - a Dog

by

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5 mag. Swain's grebe
3-5007 mag. glass
heads & grebe

A scared, belligerent wild bird dropped in at our door a few days ago, as big a surprise to us as to him. The Donald Eadens, who have a dairy farm in Clackamas County, had found him helpless in one of their fields. Mrs. Eaden phoned that he didn't seem to be injured, but he was a queer bird. So she made the twenty mile trip to our place on the river, and handed us a big cardboard box.

He sat bewildered on our lawn, his white breast gleaming in the sun, his neck long and slim, his head black-capped, and his bill stiletto-pointed. His alert, red eye turned nervously this way and that for some line of escape, but always his gaze came back and focused toward the river. He could not see it, but he heard water, and he felt it. But how could he get down that long, rough bank through the trees? To him that three hundred feet was an impossibility, for he was not built to travel on land, and his short, stubby wings were not made to take off on anything but deep water where he could get a start. What a dilemma for a western grebe.

The day before, he had been even worse off. He had perhaps been on his way South to the open lakes and swamps where he longed to winter with his clan, to hear the comforting gabble of the other birds, the ducks, the geese, the waders. He was winging along in the late afternoon when it became foggy, with such a gray film over the land and in the air that he got lost. Perhaps mistaking a billow of fog for a lake, he dropped down -- and lit with a thud on solid ground. His rescue some time later was even a more frightening thing.

Looking at him, we understood. His body was slim and boat-shaped, and his legs sprouted directly from its fuzzy end where a tail should have been. His feet were the surprise of his make-up. There were three pale-greenish toes, two longer than the third, with short webs between and a scalloped pattern on one edge. They were as thin and flat as if they had been put through a wringer, even the toe-nails like thin buttons. The "swan" grebe should be proud of his feet, for

they looked almost like pressed flowers.

We took him to a diminutive pond made by damming up a stream that flowed from a spring and then went meandering through brush to the river not a hundred feet away. It should have suited a wild bird, for it was hidden in the woods and lay secluded and grass-grown. He wafted out on the surface, lifted his white front straight up and stood on the water as he sent his shrill, piping whistle up to the sky. This new lake did suit him. But for how long?

He was hungry and went about dabbing his bill here and there, then looking up inquiringly why no fish, or even a frog. Three fat slugs were thrown in, and down he went for the bottom, which wasn't far for the pond was shallow. Perhaps he would have to top off with some of his own feathers, which the scientists aver are always a part of his diet. It is an appetite that must be inherited for even three-year old chicks have been found with balls of baby feathers in their stomachs.

Something startled him. Almost too quick for the eye to see, his neck was arched, the javelin bill slid downward, the slim body followed in a curve below the surface, leaving scarcely any wake behind. We followed him with our eyes, a pointed craft with wings tightly closed, propelled by its two powerful paddles at the stern. The head and sharp prow, the shadowy body, slid under the water almost like a snake. Coming up for inspection, he found things quiet and idled rocking on the water -- he, the water nymph of the bird family.

The western grebe, like others of his family, has difficulty in rising from the water. Being at home on the waves, it is not easy to frighten him into flight. But once under way, he is a strong, rapid flyer. He looks like a little torpedo shooting through the air, with his tube neck and stream-lined body stretched out in a straight line, his splay feet dragging behind, and small wings vibrating at high speed. Nor does he slacken to alight, but usually lands with a force that carries him sliding for some distance.

The nuptial season in the marsh is a riot of din and courtship. The tule masses that border the water and far out to hidden islands are the nesting places of many kinds of water birds. About one of these islands we found the floating

nests of many grebes. When leaving, the mother does not cover her eggs as some of the other grebes do. The number of eggs varies, but the families seen are usually from three to four. Instances of eleven or more eggs have been found in a nest, but two or three lazy neighbors must have welched on a willing hen and overloaded her with their own maternal cares. Other marsh-nesting birds such as terns, ducks, and coots often dump their eggs in grebes' nests. The grebe herself is none too good a housekeeper, for her eggs, naturally lusterless and sometimes lumpy, are often splotched with mud or stuck-up with bits of dirty nesting material.

The grebe chick never stays in the nest longer than a few hours. One that is just hatched is clothed in the most delicate coat of gray fur. The old grebes have a way of taking their young with them, for the little fellows climb aboard and lie under the wing coverts with their heads sticking out. The parents swim and dive readily with the young on their backs, but occasionally when one is startled the kids are bumped off and have to paddle for themselves.

The courting antics of the grebe are unique. Two birds swim side by side. Without a signal, each arches his neck several times with a jerky motion, the bills turned straight down, the black crests spread. They curve and sway their necks back, touching them against their bodies with a rythmical motion. It is like a backward bowing, a flirtatious invitation. After a few minutes they settle down and swim about unconcernedly. This goes on for some time. Then a second performance commences, more dramatic and intimate. It seems to be a climax to the bowing. As the birds swim side by side, suddenly both stand upright as if walking on the water, and rush along, splashing the surface for twenty or thirty feet, with wings tight to the bodies. They drop their breasts in a graceful glide that carries them along about fifteen feet further. This might be called the water glide.

The third act of the show is a real wedding dance. It begins as the other two with the actors swimming quietly along together, when plump, they dive. The stage is empty, the water serene for a few minutes. Suddenly they pop up, each holding a piece of moss or weed in the bill. Instantly they face each other and rise, treading water, with stiff bodies half above the surface, necks straight up. Then begins the dance, treading about breast to breast, until they make three or four circles. They drop down on the water and flirt the moss from their bills, swim-

ming away nonchalantly as if nothing has happened. The first two scenes are typical mating antics, while the last one is the most significant wedding dance we have ever witnessed in bird life.

The grebe had been with us for three days, living comfortably on his ~~little~~ pond. We were anxious to see how long he would stick it out before making the supreme effort to escape to the river. It seemed to us that all he had to do was to float over the little dam, drop below to the stream and follow it down to its outlet. It would be difficult, of course, to thread the tangle of grass and brush that almost choked the stream, but even with his helpless feet, Extremity should find a way.

On the third morning, the pond was empty and silent. We found him about half way down, caught fast under a board that supported a ram in the middle of the stream. He could have walked over the board, but something in a water bird's mind prevented him. You might say this was his third rescue, for if we had not found him he probably would have died there. We took him down to the river bank and saw him slide away on the big water, knowing that after he got his bearings he would take off for his happy land.