

## TRIPLE NESTING RECORD FOR PIED-BILLED GREBE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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*Swamp's Edge, Whaletown, BC. V0P 1Z0*

On Cortes Island, British Columbia, the Pied-billed Grebe is listed as a rare, year-round resident, and several nesting records do exist (Sirk et al. 1993). In fact, the species can be encountered reliably in a few favoured locations. Swamp's Edge, a small private wetland sanctuary, is foremost among them. A two-hectare, beaver-created marsh is heavily vegetated, with the most prominent emergent plant being tule (*Scirpus lacustris*), providing excellent cover for a number of waterbirds (Figure 1). The deeper water areas support yellow pond-lilies (*Nuphar polysepalum*), water shield (*Brasenia schreberi*), and a number of widespread pondweeds (e.g., *Potamogeton natans*). Cattails (*Typha latifolia*) and various sedges (*Carex* spp.) and rushes (*Juncus* spp.) line the shore. To the south, a narrow passage connects to the 12 ha of open water of Anvil Lake. A large population of three-spine stickleback (*Gasterosteus aculeatus*) form the main food supply for the grebes. They supplement their diet by taking the occasional sizeable prickly sculpin (*Cottus asper*), providing us with highly entertaining observations of a parent bird trying to teach the young how to deal with such a substantial prey item.

The year 2006 began like other years with several grebes in evidence in the wetland and lake.



**Figure 1.** Swamp's Edge, a beaver-created wetland with emergents and aquatic plants, where a pair of Pied-billed Grebes successfully raised three broods in 2006. Note the narrow "beaver channels" running through the surface cover of water shield. Cortes Island, BC. 25 September 2006 (Christian Gronau).

Indeed, the first light of 1 January was greeted by their territorial calls, followed a few days later by aggressive displays, when more than two birds met up. A pair of Pied-billed Grebes remained in evidence throughout the early spring, being conspicuously vocal.

On 18 May my wife and I observed, for the first time that year, two young in their striped juvenile plumage being fed by one adult. The other adult remained concealed within the tule, calling frequently. This scenario repeated itself during the following weeks, until on 10 July we observed one adult chasing the two now fully grown juveniles, while from the tule we could hear the unmistakable incessant cheeping of new young! Five days later we were able to count five immatures being tended by one adult. The second adult, again, continued to call,

off and on, from the concealment of the tule.

We reported these two nesting records (separated by 53 days) to the editors of *Wildlife Afield* on 15 July for comment. To our considerable surprise, 45 days after the second observation, on 4 September, we heard cheeping again. On 16 September we saw one juvenile, and during the following days we confirmed that this third hatching had produced one single bird, being fed by one adult just as diligently as its siblings before. After this, no adult voices were heard, except for the occasional squabble, when the parent birds encountered any of the earlier young. This aggressive behaviour leads to the dispersal of the grown young into Anvil Lake and, eventually, beyond.

The breeding season for the Pied-billed Grebe on the south coast of British Columbia can extend from

late March to at least mid-October in some years (Campbell et al. 1990). Renesting is common if the first nest or clutch is lost. Successfully raising two broods in the same year may occur, but it is not the norm (Muller and Storer 1999). The only location where the latter has been reported is at Green Lake near Seattle in Washington State. The first nesting at Swamp's Edge was probably initiated in late March and the total time for the triple nesting probably ranged between 185 and 195 days. The maximum time required for a pair of Pied-billed Grebes to build a nest (3-5 days; Muller 1995), incubate the eggs (23-27 days; Ackerman and Platter-Reiger 1979), and fledge young (35-37 days; McCallister 1963) ranges between 61 and 69 days. Adults may feed subsequent broods simultaneously for a short time, though we did not observe this behaviour. The breeding sequences of the pair of Pied-billed Grebes at Swamp's Edge were hastened, allowing the triple nesting.

Successfully raising three broods on Cortes Island is unusual and apparently the first documented for North America.

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#### *About the Author*

Christian studied palaeontology in Germany and worked as a geologist in the Great Bear Lake area in the Northwest Territories, where he also met his wife Aileen. They are naturalists who have lived for nearly 30 years off-the-grid on Cortes Island where they operate a small, strictly beach-based shellfish farm.