
The Flyover



 Mass Audubon
Berkshire Wildlife Sanctuaries

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Airing Grebences

Under the recommendations and precautionary actions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, Spring birding in Berkshire county has assumed a new look. For now, group big days, morning bird walks, and many of our favorite birding locations are on hold. High fiving after a rarity and sharing scopes to identify that distant duck seem foreign. A necessity for new means of birding excitement is upon us and has birthed a format from the ages; a newsletter. The Flyover is written to remind us of our wonderful birding community, and daily treasures of birds and migration. Each Sunday we will share a few of the week's notable bird sightings and a bit of unique natural history about the species of the week.



Green-winged Teal: By Zach Adams

A Week in Birds

The spring of 2020 has been a spring of early arrivals. Foreshadowed by numerous records of insectivorous birds during the January 1st Southern Berkshire, Christmas Bird Count (multiple Pine Warblers, Phoebes, and even a Ruby-crowned Kinglet), spring has lived up to the call and has brought plentiful numbers of phoebes, pine warblers, and a few rare water birds. Timely ice-out on the lakes also brought gifts of a Caspian Tern, Dunlin, Eurasian Green-winged Teal, and a Eurasian Widgeon.⁴ The new Berkshire County Rare Bird Alert text messaging group (open to all with a smart phone) has been ideal for tracking the movements of birds like the Eurasian Widgeon which traveled throughout the day visiting different lakes and vantage points.

This past week of birds has been a marionette to weather (as all of us are with the fickle Berkshire weather). If you got out to the lakes early in the week before the last few days of rain, wind, thunder, lightning, hail, sleet, snow, and even more wind, then you might have chanced upon some great water bird movement. Even as the week crept to colder temperatures more and more passerines began to pop up, including 4 warbler species (Pine, Palm, Yellow-rumped, and Louisiana Waterthrush). Palm Warblers and Hermit Thrushes both seemed to move in less than ideal conditions this week, and now are being reported frequently across the county.⁴ Winds are expected to switch to the south on Saturday night bringing much warmer weather and hopes of more warblers, and perhaps even Blue-gray Gnatcatcher!

Continuously through the whole week and even through the blustery weekend, there has been excellent sightings of grebes. All three of our regular grebe visitors were reported throughout the week, including all three on Stockbridge Bowl at once. That same day, grebes were being reported across Berkshire County in sometimes large numbers. The largest of which, a glorious group of 29

Red-necked Grebes seen on Pontoosuc (April 7th) making the Red-necked Grebe our Bird of the Week.⁴

Bird of the Week

Red-necked Grebe (*Podiceps grisegena*)

Often recognized by their size at first, the Red-necked Grebe is the largest of grebes that regularly move through Berkshire County. These slender and impressive birds are not at all a common migrant, but are joy to spot when they first begin to refuel on the local lakes. Like all grebes their profile on the water is low and appears to lack a butt, unlike their duck relatives. Navigating northward to their breeding grounds in northern marshes (from the prairie potholes to the tundra), many of the Red-necked Grebes that have stopped over on the Berkshire lakes



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have bestowed us with their stunning alternate (breeding) plumage.¹ Their striking barn red neck and flashy silver cheek patch are not only diagnostic, but beautiful. During their fall migration, most (if not all) of the Red-necked Grebes that pass through Berkshire County have returned to the much drabber basic (winter) plumage, but are markedly picked-out by their body and bill size; both being larger than either the Horned or Pied-billed Grebe. Even as of Saturday, multiple Red-necked Grebes have been seen on local lakes and their elegant adornment is worth witnessing.

Grebes are in the family podicipediformes which refers to their strangely shaped feet (not webbed but widely lobed) which are positioned well towards the rear of the body and ideal for swimming under water for long periods of times and notoriously escaping from scope view.² Grebes are fascinatingly unique birds often noted for their elaborate courtship displays, but have a few lesser discussed but equally intriguing behaviors. Like many floating water birds, grebes molt their flight feathers almost all at once leaving them flightless and causing their muscles to atrophy, and some even become obese with their dietary habits.³ Grebes also often ingest their own feathers to help protect their dietary tract from puncture wounds from sharp pieces of fish and later regurgitate both in the form of a pellet. Red-necked grebes nest on large floating mats of wetland material¹, and after hatching, the precocial young ride on the back of their parents.³ With new found time and migration in swing, get out there and enjoy the cordial travelers of spring.

Works Cited

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