

Clark's Grebe *Aechmophorus clarkii*

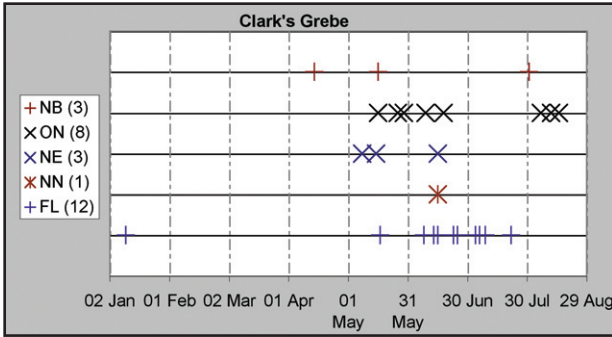
Long considered a color morph of the Western Grebe rather than a distinct species, Clark's Grebe is only barely over the threshold of being a species. In San Diego County hybridization is frequent. In biology, so far as is known, the differences between the two grebes are trivial. The two occur in the same habitats, breed in mixed colonies, and flock together in winter. As a breeding bird in San Diego County, the Western tends to be somewhat more numerous than Clark's, but the difference is not great. As a winter visitor, however, the Western far outnumbers Clark's.

Breeding distribution: The distribution of Clark's Grebe is closely similar to that of the Western. At O'Neill Lake (E6), Clark's occurs in numbers similar to those of the



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Western, counts in summer ranging up to seven on 4 July 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg). A pair nested there apparently



unsuccessfully in 1997, then successful nesting began in 1999, the same year as the Western. Indeed, many of the pairs at this site have been mixed. At Buena Vista Lagoon (H5/H6), by contrast, Clark's Grebe is much less numerous than the Western and not confirmed nesting; our high count here during late spring or summer was only three on 2 May 1999 (J. Determan), and we did not confirm the species' nesting. At San Dieguito Reservoir (K8), our only records were in winter, but the birds bred there in 1997–98, with up to ten individuals including one pair with two nearly grown young and others in courtship display 10 January 1998 (K. Aldern). Lake Hodges is as major a site for Clark's as for the Western; counts here in spring and summer ranged up to 35 in square K10 on 16 April 1997 (V. P. Johnson) and 35 in K11 on 13 June 1998 (E. C. Hall). At Sweetwater Reservoir (S12/S13) Clark's breeds regularly but in numbers smaller than the Western (eight on 4 May 1998, P. Famolaro). At Lower Otay Lake (U14) Clark's is also confirmed breeding (young on 4 July 1999, S. Buchanan) but occurs usually in small numbers; the only count of more than ten was of 55 on 29 May 2001 (N. Osborn).

We confirmed nesting of Clark's Grebe at two sites where the Western did not breed. On 17 May 1997 a

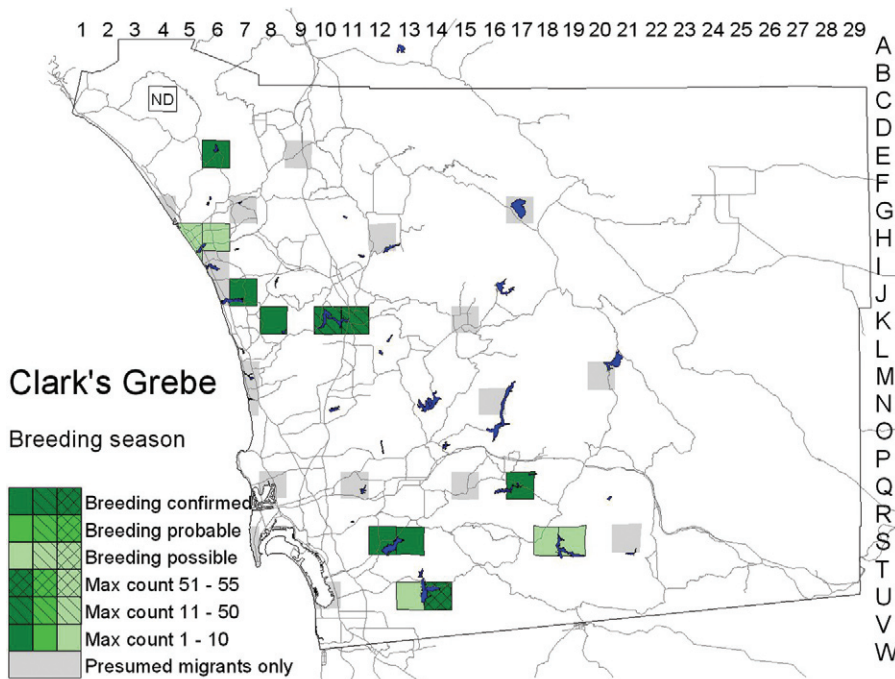
chick was at the east end of Batiquitos Lagoon (J7; M. Baumgartel). In 1998, up to eight adults were at the east end of Loveland Reservoir (Q17) 29 April, but on 22 June, when one was on a completed nest with no eggs, it appeared to be the only bird left (P. Famolaro).

We noted just a few Clark's Grebes summering at lakes where they did not breed. The only records of more than single birds were of two on Lake Murray (Q11) 16 July 1999 (N. Osborn) and three on Lake Wohlford (H12) 14 July 1999 (D. C. Seals). Some Clark's, however, may have been overlooked among Western Grebes.

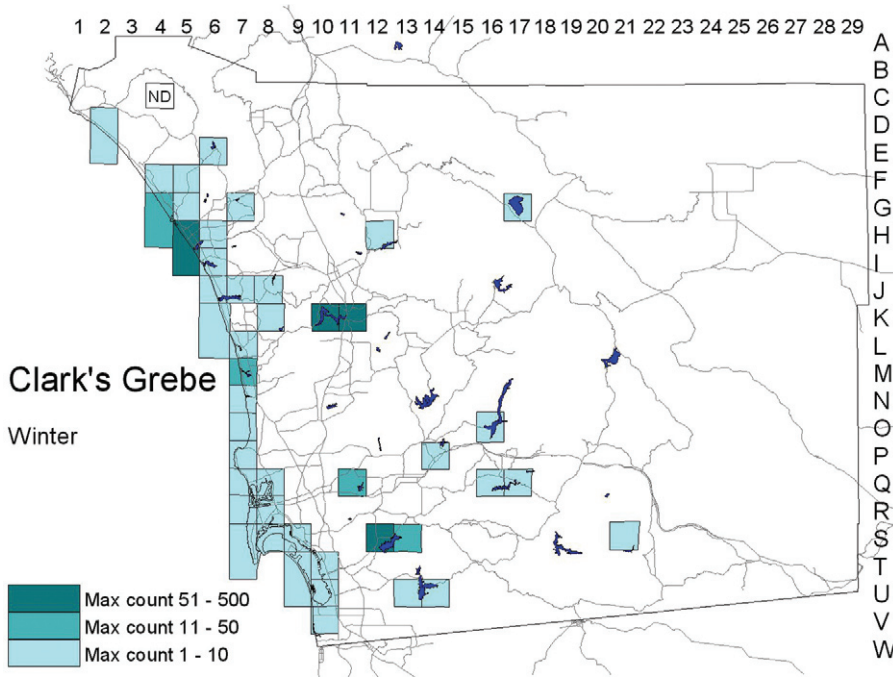
Nesting: No differences in nesting biology between the Western and Clark's Grebes have been reported (Storer and Nuechterlein 1992). From 1997 to 2002, we noted winter breeding of Clark's Grebe only once, at San Dieguito Reservoir. The other records correspond to egg laying from about mid April to early August.

Migration: The migration schedule of Clark's Grebe appears to be the same as that of the Western. Migrants have departed largely by mid April though a few may straggle to early May. Six at Agua Hedionda Lagoon (I6) 20 April 1999 (P. A. Ginsburg) made our latest spring coastal count of more than two individuals. Two in Mission Bay (Q8) 28 June–8 July 1999 (J. C. Worley) and one in the Santa Margarita River estuary (G4) 30 June 2000 (P. A. Ginsburg) were the only summering Clark's Grebes reported from salt water away from breeding sites.

Winter: In winter, Clark's Grebe is considerably more numerous than in summer on Sweetwater Reservoir (up to 500 on 18 December 1999, P. Famolaro) and Lake Hodges (up to 83 on 23 December 2001, R. L. Barber), sometimes on Buena Vista Lagoon (70 on 27 December 1997, D. Rorick). Winter counts at other sites were of 15 birds or fewer. On salt water especially, Clark's makes up a small minority of grebe flocks; for example, on 18 December 1999, when D.



W. Povey and M. B. Mulrooney recorded 1500 Western Grebes off Coronado they noted only 15 Clark's. During their weekly census of the salt works 1993–94, Stadtlander and Konecny (1994) recorded a maximum of 73 Clark's on 17 February 1993, but this was their only count of more than 25. Ratti (1981) found 13% of the 332 wintering *Aechmophorus* grebes he observed around San Diego in January 1977 to be Clark's. Part of the apparent difference between the species by season, however, may be due to the plumage difference between them being less well marked in winter and to the difficulty in distinguishing the birds at a distance in the large flocks seen offshore.



Conservation: Because Clark's Grebe was widely recognized as a species distinct from the Western Grebe only in the early 1980s there are no substantial historical data on its status. In San Diego County the careers of the two grebes appear to be progressing in tandem.

Taxonomy: The extent of hybridization between the

between these grebes could use further study.

Geographic variation in Clark's Grebe parallels that in the Western, with a small subspecies on the Mexican Plateau. The larger subspecies of Clark's found in the United States is *A. c. transitionalis* Dickerman, 1986.

Western and Clark's Grebes in San Diego County appears to be considerably higher than in the areas furnishing the data on which the decision to split the species was based (Ratti 1979). At Lake O'Neill mixed pairs are frequent, perhaps just as frequent as if the birds were selecting their mates without regard to species (P. A. Ginsburg). Of three nests at Sweetwater Reservoir observed by A. Mercieca in 2003, two belonged to mixed pairs. Possibly each grebe's preference for its own species emerges only where the number of each in a colony is large. Possibly the degree of reproductive isolation between them varies regionally. The situation in San Diego County suggests that the relationship