

FEATHERED NEIGHBORS

WATER BABIES

MRS. B. M. HOSGOOD, Scott

A slough is a magical place. Whether it be a willow-fringed pot-hole in a field or an alkali lake a couple of miles long, its reedy shallows and clear open stretches are home to the true waterfowl. I sometimes wonder how such birds as coots and grebes manage the migration. Certain it is that, once arrived in spring, they settle down on the water to use their wings as little as may be until chilly fall nights warn them to prepare for another long flight.

Here is Mrs. Coot, often called a mudhen. She is very dark gray—nearly black—with a white bill as contrast. How she hates to fly! When startled off the water, she makes a great to do with wild beatings of her small wings and furious kickings

of her lobed feet raising a great splutter of water. In all probability she will go only a few yards before she drops back to water again.

Here among the rushes is her nest! It is merely a mass of floating debris, rotting reeds and dank marsh grass. Count the heavily spotted eggs. Ten? Fifteen? Probably there is a second layer below the top ones. Coots, like domestic hens, are communal beings where nests are concerned. I have seen as many as twenty-two eggs in a nest, the bottom layer so awash that I wondered whether they could hatch. Here is a chick just out of the shell, a cute bit of orange and black fluff—but how he can dive!

Speaking of diving, it is the grebes that are past-masters at that art. Nearly every slough has a pair of them and they don't object to a dug-out. Grebes are somewhat smaller than coots, and of a slimmer, more graceful build with no tails to speak of at all. We have three varieties common here. Casually seen, all appear as dark colored swimmers, but they are easily distinguished. The eared grebe wears a pointed crest and a gay orange fan of feathers on each side of the head. The horned grebe has a dark ruff fronted with light ear tufts which suggest horns. The third one, the pied-billed grebe, does not sport these decorations. Neither has he the chestnut trimming along the water-line which you may or may not notice. Indeed, he is quite a soberly colored little fellow, much duller and plainer than his cousins.

Grebes are often called "Hell-divers" and sometimes "Water Witches." At the least alarm they disappear silently below the surface to reappear as silently on the opposite side of the slough.

Hérons (Cont.)

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grown Night Herons were perched in trees near the nest and stood perfectly still although we were only a few feet distant.

Three half grown Night Herons in a nest put on the best display, opening their huge mouths very wide and attempting to peck the hand that came near to clear the foliage to take a picture. It appears that the lower jaw is so constructed that it spreads at the base, when the mouth is opened allowing more space for swallowing larger portions of food. There was some evidence of the fish diet preferred by Herons. While the Heronry was surrounded by water, there were no fish in these waters. Adult Blue Herons were seen going off, apparently going some fifteen miles or more for fish. There was evidence of fairly high mortality among the young. The eggs were a light blue-green color. On the ground we found two late nesting Mallards. One with seven eggs and one with eight.

Next year with a blind and telephoto lens, some good pictures may be obtained.

A Black-crowned Night Heron, banded at Rousay Lake, Yorkton, Sask., on August 3, 1947, by Dr. Stuart Houston, was shot at Faust, Lesser Slave Lake, Alberta, on October 19, 1951.