

A Bird for all Seasons

Little Grebe

Earlier this week I took a stroll along the River Lagan from the new bridge at Stranmillis to Shaw's Bridge. The weather was pleasant, with just a slight breeze and mainly sunny. Birds were singing in the trees which fringe the river. I could hear all four tits – Great, Blue, Coal and Long-tailed, as well as Robin, Wren, Dunnock and Goldfinch. Suddenly a different sound echoed across the water. This was the bubbling call of the Dabchick, or Little Grebe. The call is beautiful and haunting. In the shadows near the far bank I saw the instigator of the sound. As I watched, the grebe dived, surfacing again several yards away. I was able to inspect it closely and noted that it was already moulting out of its winter plumage into its brighter breeding garb. The Little Grebe is the smallest member of the grebe family.

It was then joined by a second bird, closer to where I was standing. As the second bird became aware of my presence, it dived, leaving only a series of concentric ripples on the water. I was reminded of Shakespeare's description of the Little Grebe:

“Like a dive-dapper peering through a wave
Who, being looked on, ducks as quickly in”.



Little Grebe

Moving on, I was pleased to count at least ten individuals. This means that there is a healthy breeding population of Little Grebes on the Lagan. There is plenty of suitable cover for these birds to breed on the Lagan. They are territorial, and both birds will defend their territory. If an intruder is sighted, the birds will make rapid dashes across the water with wings half-raised to drive off any potential rival. Like other grebes, they are more at home on water than on land. They are capable of

walking, albeit in an awkward manner. In winter, they are frequently to be seen on estuaries, and sometimes hunt in family parties at this time of year.

Very often, nicknames given to birds are more colourful than their proper names. In some parts of the country the Little Grebe is known as “Tom Pudding”, because of its round, football-like shape. Other nicknames include: “Doucker” and “Bonnetie”, as well as Shakespeare’s “Dive-dapper”. Dabchicks build a nest of floating vegetation, usually anchored to roots of protruding branches at the water’s edge. The rotting vegetation of the nest generates heat which helps incubate the eggs. Both parents share incubation of the 4-6 eggs. When each bird returns to the nest, it will bring a strand of fresh green material to add to it.

When left unattended, the eggs are covered to prevent predation. The young can swim within hours of hatching, but life for them is not without its perils, as they are considered a delicacy by Herons and Pike. Little Grebes will take fish between one and two inches long, with an occasional bit of greenery for variety. I look forward to paying a return visit to this location, to hear once again the haunting call and perhaps see the young making their first forays into the world.

Robert McDowell
20 January 2022