

IDENTIFYING LOONS & GREBES IN COASTAL BRITISH COLUMBIA

With their flashy and distinctive breeding plumage, most species of loons and grebes are fairly easy to identify, even at long distance, but in winter things get a little tougher. Nearly all are reduced to shades of white, gray, and black, making size and structure important in identification (in combination with plumage).

Common Loon (COLO)

- Widespread throughout BC coastal waters (fall-spring)
- In general, COLOs are dark-gray above and pale below
- Larger, blockier head than Pacific Loon
- Partial pale collar on neck gives it a jagged look
- Larger bill than Pacific

Adult Common Loon in the winter (above by Guy Monty)



Pacific Loon (PALO)

- Sometimes in flocks of several hundred (fall-spring)
- Tends to be more numerous offshore
- Smaller than similar-looking COLO with smooth, rounded head
- Often shows a dark "chin-strap"
- Usually darker around eye than COLO
- Small, straight bill
- In flight, more slender and streamline than bulky COLO

Pacific Loon in the winter (Photo: Ralph Hocken)



Red-throated Loon (RTLO)

- Usually not as numerous as the other two loons on the BC coast
- Often found in sheltered coves/harbours, and shallow estuaries
- Distinctive thin bill appears upturned
- Head often peaked near the rear
- Neat speckling on back
- Winter adult has clean white face; juvenile shows light gray streaking
- In flight, often droops its neck

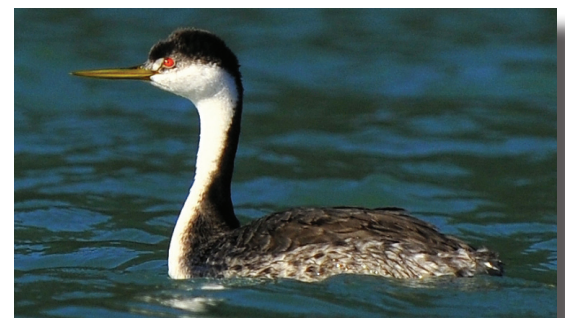
Red-throated Loon (Photo: Ralph Hocken)



Western Grebe (WEGR)

- Large grebe with slender build
- Long neck (white throat, thin black nape)
- Greenish-yellow bill, black crown, gray above cheeks & around red eye
- Often seen in large wintering flocks
- Dark gray back, with paler gray/silver flanks
- Like other grebes, sleeps with bill facing forward (opposite of ducks)

Western Grebe (Photo: Gord Gadsden)



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Red-necked Grebe (RNGR)

- Medium-sized grebe with large yellow-green beak
- Larger than Horned Grebe with less white and longer bill
- Stockier than Western Grebe, with much less white
- Neck often reddish-brown

Red-necked Grebe (Photo: Ralph Hocken)



Horned Grebe (HOGGR)

- Our commonest wintering grebe
- Smaller than Red-necked and Western with short grayish beak
- White face with black crown
- Squarer-headed than Eared Grebe
- Often in small flocks

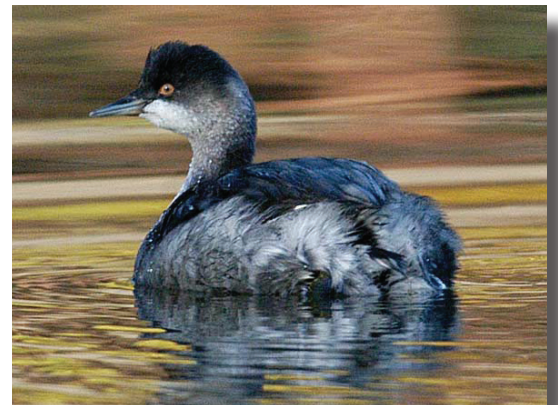
Horned Grebe (Photo: Mike Yip)



Eared Grebe (EAGR)

- The least common grebe in winter (other than Clark's)
- Similar to Horned but with daintier/thinner neck and smaller more rounded head
- Bill is short and sharper than HOGGR with a dark tip
- Often more "fluffier"-looking in the rear than HOGGR
- Face/auriculars are dark instead of white

Eared Grebe (Photo: Mike Yip)



Pied-billed Grebe (PBGR)

- Almost always found in freshwater environments
- Unlike any other BC grebe
- Small grebe with buffy-brown flanks/neck
- Small bill is pale with a dark ring

Pied-billed Grebe (Photo: Paul Kushmin)



Adapted October 2020 from Birds Canada publication prepared by Russell Cannings, June 2013.