

FEATURED PHOTO

HYPEREUMELANISTIC HORNED GREBE OBSERVED IN EASTERN INTERIOR ALASKA

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On 30 May, 31 May, and 1 June 2017 we observed a melanistic Horned Grebe (*Podiceps auritus*) at Canvasback Lake (66° 23.13' N, 146° 23.18' W) on the Yukon Flats National Wildlife Refuge, situated in eastern interior Alaska, 185 km north of Fairbanks. We photographed it, accompanied by a smaller Horned Grebe in normal breeding plumage, on 30 and 31 May (see this issue's outside back cover). At midday on 30 May the melanistic grebe responded to our playing a recorded call of a territorial male by assertively approaching and greeting the normally plumaged grebe, its likely mate. The melanistic bird remained with that grebe throughout our playing of the call.

Noticeably larger than the second bird so presumably a male, the melanistic Horned Grebe had the mantle, back, and rump black. Its nape, crown, forehead, facial feathers, and base of its "horns" were dark brown and transitioned into iridescent black horn tufts and "helmet" feathers. Except for the white tip, the bill was solid black and differed from that of its apparent mate, which had white contours on the upper and lower mandibles. The pupil of the eye was black, ringed in pale yellow, and the remainder of the iris was scarlet. In the other Horned Grebes in the area the rings around the pupil varied from pale yellow to deep orange. We departed the area on 2 June 2017. A crew from the refuge surveyed broods of waterfowl on the lake from 17 to 24 July 2017; their attempts to relocate the bird were unsuccessful.

Melanins are the pigments responsible for dark plumage colors in birds. Davis (2007) pointed out that of the two general types of pigments, melanins and carotenoids, the former predominate among darker colors. Of the two types of melanins, eumelanins are common in black, gray, and dark brown feathers, whereas pheomelanins are common in brown and chestnut colors (Van Grouw 2017). Darker-than-normal plumage is referred to as hypermelanism (also called melanism or nigrism); it is termed hypereumelanism when the plumage is predominantly black. We suspect that the dark-pigmented grebe we observed represents an example of hypereumelanism. Van Grouw (2013) described three ways in which this condition typically affects plumage: (1) normally dark markings have a more vivid appearance and exceed their typical boundaries, often causing the remaining plumage to appear dark as well; (2) all plumage is predominantly brown or black; and (3) the normal plumage pattern or pigment distribution is altered, but the plumage is not darkened. Our bird fits the second category well, having predominantly black plumage and lacking the normal chestnut of the foreneck, lores, upper breast, and flanks and the pale yellow of the horn tufts. Cases of aberrant plumages in grebes have been compiled and reported worldwide (Dittberner and Dittberner 1979, Jehl 1985, Thiede 2005). Konter (2015) compiled, organized, and analyzed the literature on and photos of aberrant grebes from the past 150 years, providing a world view of reported plumage aberration in grebes, and describing the likely causes of those aberrations. So far as we have been able to determine, our observation provides the first report of hypereumelanism in the Horned Grebe.

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