

THE NORTHERNMOST RECORD OF THE LEAST GREBE (*TACHYBAPTUS DOMINICUS BANGSI*) IN BAJA CALIFORNIA

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ABSTRACT: A specimen of the Least Grebe (*Tachybaptus dominicus bangsi*) from San Francisco de la Sierra, Baja California Sur, Mexico, collected 6 April 2022, was 36 km north of the oasis of San Ignacio, where the species breeds and site of the previous northernmost records on the peninsula. The bird's occurrence on a small isolated pond yet coming into breeding condition highlight the species' opportunism, possibly critical to its survival on the arid Baja California peninsula where freshwater oases suitable for the Least Grebe are few.

On 6 April 2022, during an inventory of birds and mammals in the Sierra San Francisco, a sky island in the municipality of Mulegé, Baja California Sur, Mexico, we collected an adult female Least Grebe (*Tachybaptus dominicus*; Figure 1). It was found at a small reservoir (34 × 10 m, >2 m deep) that is part of a series of artificial reservoirs built along the rocky Cañón San Francisco, located just southwest of the town of San Francisco de la Sierra (27° 35' N, 113° 01' W, elev. 1120 m; Figure 2).



FIGURE 1. Adult female *Tachybaptus dominicus bangsi* (UABC 2225) collected 6 April 2022 at a pond near San Francisco de la Sierra, Sierra San Francisco, Baja California Sur, Mexico.

Photo by Gorgonio Ruiz-Campos

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FIGURE 2. Collection site of Least Grebe in the vicinity of San Francisco de la Sierra, Sierra San Francisco, municipality of Mulegé, Baja California Sur, Mexico.

Photo by Gorgonio Ruiz-Campos

The low transparency of the water and absence of aquatic macrophytes identify this reservoir as unsuitable breeding habitat for this grebe. Vegetation around the collecting site is characterized by elements of the Central Desert such as Elephant Cactus (*Pachycereus pringlei*), Organ Pipe Cactus (*Stenocereus thurberi*), Baja California Cholla (*Cylindropuntia cholla*), and Western Honey Mesquite (*Prosopis glandulosa*) (Rebman and Roberts 2012).

Specimen measurements include total length 205 mm, mass 110.2 g, wingspan 370 mm, wing chord 85.7 mm, exposed culmen 20.8 mm, bill length (nostril to tip)

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12.6 mm, tarsus 32.9 mm, and ovary 7×8 mm with diameter of largest ovum ~ 2.5 mm. The measurements of the ova suggest that the bird was coming into breeding condition, despite the lack of a nearby male or conditions suitable for nesting at the pond. The specimen (UABC 2225; Figure 1) was deposited in the Bird Collection, Vertebrate Laboratory, Faculty of Sciences, Autonomous University of Baja California (UABC).

The Least Grebe is the smallest New World grebe, widely distributed in fresh and brackish water in tropical and subtropical zones from southern Texas to northern Argentina. The low wing loading of these birds, their generalized feeding habits, and their high reproductive rate allow them to use temporary bodies of fresh water as well as large permanent ones (Storer 2020). Two (Storer 2020) or three (Storer and Getty 1985) of the five recognized subspecies of *T. dominicus* (Dickinson and Renssen 2013) occur in North America: *T. d. bangsi* van Rossem and Hachisuka, 1937 {type locality: Santiago, Baja California [Sur], Mexico} occurs in Baja California Sur, while *T. d. brachypterus* is widespread in the rest of Mexico and in Central America (and perhaps best synonymized with *T. d. dominicus*, of the West Indies). Least Grebes occurring on the east side of the Gulf of California in Sonora and Sinaloa have also been ascribed to *T. d. bangsi* but might be intermediate (Storer and Getty 1985). Subspecies *bangsi* differs from the North American mainland bird in its smaller size (wing chord: male <96 mm and female <93 mm) and paler, grayer upper parts (Storer 2020). Although nonmigratory, Least Grebes have been twice found in southern California as stragglers or pioneers (Hamilton et al. 2007), have nested along the lower Colorado River (McMurry and Monson 1947), and have occurred as far north as Arkansas (Cardiff 2009).

In mainland Mexico, the Least Grebe ranges from sea level to 2400 m, from Sonora and Tamaulipas on the slopes, and locally from about Aguascalientes and San Luis Potosí in the interior, south to El Salvador and western Nicaragua; it occurs also on the island of Cozumel (Howell and Webb 1995, <https://ebird.org/species/leagre>). Subspecies *bangsi* ranges uncommonly and locally from San Ignacio oasis (Bancroft 1930) to San José del Cabo (Brewster 1902), with most voucher specimens coming from the Cape region (Santiago, Agua Caliente, and Todos Santos oases). The northernmost previous specimens are from Santa Águeda, “10 miles west” (actually 12 km southwest) of Santa Rosalía (Univ. Michigan Mus. Zool. 120066 and 120067, 2 May 1928, and 120069, 9 June 1928) (<http://portal.vertnet.org/search?q=tachybaptus+dominicus>). Sight records elsewhere on the peninsula include those from Las Pocitas region (Llinas and Jiménez 1997), artificial reservoirs near La Paz city (Carmona et al. 1999), and many recent reports from oases between Punta El Mechudo and San Ignacio (<https://ebird.org/species/leagre>). Our specimen provides the northernmost record of the species on the Baja California peninsula and lends credence to a recent sighting (30 March 2022) in the vicinity of San Francisco de la Sierra (<https://ebird.org/hotspot/L18367774>).

Numbers in Baja California Sur have recently fluctuated. Over a century ago this subspecies was common in ponds in the Cape Region (Brewster 1902, Grinnell 1928) and nested as far north as San Ignacio oasis (Bancroft 1930), but since 1930 the population has experienced periods of contraction and colonization throughout its range (Llinas and Jiménez 1997, Wurster et al. 2001, Unitt 2001). Other wetland-associated species of Baja California Sur, such as Belding’s Yellowthroat (*Geothlypis beldingi*), also disperse among isolated oases with suitable habitat (Erickson et al. 2008). More explorations of the oases of the northern Sierra San Francisco (San Nicolás and San Gregorio areas) would help to clarify the current abundance and distribution of the Least Grebe in the region.

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