

Australasian Grebes: Little Grebes – big attitude!

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In February-March, 2007, we followed the family life of a pair of Australasian Grebes (*Tachybaptus novaehollandiae*), which nested in the lake at the Mt Coot-tha Botanical Gardens, Brisbane. We used a Panasonic Lumix FZ7 and a Canon EOS 350D with a Sigma 170-500mm lens, not stabilized.



The Gardens are quite busy, particularly at weekends, so the birds were accustomed to people, and could be approached without disturbance.



The lakes were shared by a range of other waterbirds, as well as many species of dragonflies and damselflies, which are a favourite food source for Grebes.



The lakes were also home to some less-than-friendly creatures. Eastern Water Dragons take chicks of waterbirds.



Long-finned eels also thrive in the lake, and pose a threat to waterbird chicks. We watched one swallow a Dusky Moorhen chick in front of an oblivious adult.



The Grebes built their nest in the middle of the lake below the café. It consisted of a floating platform of weed, and appeared to be tethered to other vegetation in the lake.



Dragonfly larvae provided a major food source for the demanding chicks.



At the beginning of February, there were three small chicks and one egg (just visible) in the nest. The chicks were already precocious, swimming out to greet their parents each time they returned with food..



By 5 February, all four chicks had hatched, and spent their time in the nest, or swimming close to it.



Both Grebes were extremely attentive parents. One stayed with the nest, chicks and eggs, while the other foraged for food. Fortunately, the lakes provided a rich source of food.



They tobogganed down the nest, and from their parents' backs, almost like baby turtles.



One of their favourite places was tucked into the fluffy feathers under their parents' wings, usually with their heads out to watch the activities on the lake.



Both parents were still actively involved in feeding the ever-hungry and noisy chicks. Here, one is fed a small fish, and the other a dragonfly larva. Anyone who has visited a lake or pond with Grebe chicks will be familiar with their incessant piping!



About this time, one of the chick disappeared, despite the vigorous efforts of their parents in driving off eels, water dragons and birds which came too close. The size difference in the

remaining chicks is very clear as they rest on a lily pad.



Occasionally, one or other parent took a short break, sometimes standing on the exposed rocks with other birds. Out of the water, their unique shape and enormous feet are very obvious.



At about 2-3 weeks old, the chicks still relied on their parents for food, though they were clearly learning the basics of foraging.



This chick is showing great interest in a piece of weed. Its enormous feet are visible under the water.



The size of prey given to the chicks increased as they grew. Here, one of the parents subdued a dragonfly before offering to the eager chicks.



Consuming the dragonfly was a slow process, under the watchful eye of one of the parents.



The chicks struggled for possession of this prize.



At almost 3 weeks, the chicks still occasionally tried to hitch a ride under their parents' wings, but parents would have none of it. The smallest chick had had difficulty in competing with its larger siblings for food, and disappeared at about this time.



The smallest managed to get possession very briefly, but it was soon snatched by one of the larger chicks.



Resting chicks often flip their feet onto their backs.



Adults also rest occasionally with their feet on their backs, though this is usually hidden by their wings. Here a large toe is just visible on the right.



A rare quiet moment shared between parent and chick.



Although the chicks have distinctive markings, quite dissimilar to their parents, there's no mistaking them once they stretch their feet!



At seven weeks, the chicks were well-developed, but still had their juvenile stripes.



The remaining two chicks, though they were now competent divers, continued to follow their parents, begging loudly. Usually, one followed each parent.



By then, though, the remaining two chicks were sufficiently adult to adopt their parents' place on the rock.