

Australasian Grebes Eat a Mammal

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Summary. A small mammal was eaten by three Australasian Grebes *Tachybaptus novaehollandiae* in western New South Wales. This event was probably opportunistic, though not necessarily unusual.

At ~ 1400 h on 25 September 2007 the authors visited Long Tank at 32°07'S, 142°46'E on Wirryilka Station, 44 km north-west of Menindee in western New South Wales. Shortly after our arrival, we noted one of several Australasian Grebes *Tachybaptus novaehollandiae* with an unidentified object in its bill which was held close to the surface of the water. This object appeared fluffy and pale brown. It was slightly shorter and much thinner than the Grebe's body. The Grebe held the object with great difficulty. In its attempts to manipulate the object, a long dark-brown cylindrical tail, similar that of a House Mouse *Mus domesticus*, and close to the length of the rest of the object, was flipped up out of the water and was in clear view. This revealed that the object was the body of a mammal.

At this point two more Australasian Grebes were attracted to the first bird and began to pull at the mammal with their bills. The prey then split into pieces and the initial Grebe was seen to manipulate the distal portion and swallow it tail last. All portions of the mammal seen were eaten by the Grebes.

The mammal was evidently in a state of decomposition given the ease with which the Grebes were able to pull it apart. It is thus not likely to have been killed by these Grebes and may have been recovered from underwater. The species of mammal concerned is not known. The introduced House Mouse is widespread across Australia and is a likely contender, but many other small mammals have been recorded in recent decades at nearby Kinchega National Park, including Sandy Inland Mouse *Pseudomys hermannsburgensis*, Kultarr *Antechinomys laniger*, Paucident Planigale *Planigale gilesi*, Narrow-nosed Planigale *P. tenuirostris* and Fat-tailed Dunnart *Sminthopsis crassicaudata* (Dickman & Read 1992; Dickman 1993), and were possible.

We are not aware of any previous records of Australasian Grebes eating mammalian remains (e.g. Barker & Vestjens 1989; Marchant & Higgins 1990; Rose 2000). Nonetheless, this is not the first record of a small grebe eating a mammal, though this was recorded only as recently as March 2003 (Fisher 2005). In that instance, a similar-sized Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* was seen to eat a small unidentified mammal head first, though it was again not noted whether the grebe killed the mammal.

Small grebes may generally feed opportunistically. Australasian Grebes have been seen feeding on invertebrates disturbed by Pacific Black Ducks *Anas superciliosa* on more than one occasion (Hobbs 1959; Maddock 1997), and previously we have noted Australasian Grebes foraging adjacent to other feeding waterfowl (e.g. Black Swan *Cygnus atratus* and Dusky Moorhen *Gallinula tenebrosa*) (BK & IM pers. obs.). Similarly, the Little Grebe has been noted feeding

opportunistically in the company of scuba divers in England (Nash 2004). The consumption of the small mammal at Long Tank was undoubtedly an opportunistic event; however, this does not mean that the eating of dead vertebrates is rare. Carrion can be found at farm dams on a regular basis, but from this single observation it is not clear whether grebes regularly feed on such items.

Walter Boles helped provide some references for this note.

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