

## Great Crested Grebes

I wonder if people in cities like Thebes  
paid any attention to creatures like grebes?  
I ponder this question so far back in time  
as part of my search for a suitable rhyme,  
but also because there is something about  
these peculiar birds. There is surely no doubt  
those wonderful thinkers in countries like Greece,  
observers of nature, not just war and peace,  
would have noticed their truly mysterious ways  
of expressing their courtship in complex displays.

So likewise in Britain with plenty of waters  
where grebes could display and produce sons and daughters,  
their numbers were high. But alas, more's the pity,  
mankind soon outstripped them with many a city;  
so that things reached a crisis a century ago  
and this species of water-bird suffered a blow  
when the ladies of London developed a passion  
for specialised hand-muffs, a dangerous fashion,  
to keep their hands warm in the cold winter weather,  
not with muffs made from wool but a new kind of feather.  
And thus it was grebes and not sheep who were skinned  
to provide the white "grebe fur". And nobody sinned:  
no laws for protection of birds in those days.  
Then a few gallant ladies decided to raise  
a protest through Parliament, creating a scene,  
that even obtained some support from the Queen.  
On the brink of extinction a Royal line was drawn  
and with five pairs to go the RSPB was born.

Have you been out in springtime and seen a pair prance,  
both upright like bottles performing a dance?  
You are watching the climax of weeks of display  
where both birds of a pair, in a hesitant way,  
will meet beak to beak – their head-shaking display.  
Each beak is a weapon, so both need to know  
they are meeting a partner instead of a foe.  
It's their version of kissing. They wear round their necks  
elaborate ruffs, an enticement to sex,  
chestnut frills with black tips, and a black crest above,  
signs not of aggression but friendship and love.  
For grebes can be violent, their beaks are too sharp,  
too dangerous a threat for "a snog in the park".  
Just watch their head-shaking, with necks tall and slender  
and I think you'll agree that their courtship is tender.

All species of birds have their methods of doing,  
what humans would label as billing and cooing.

When Great-crested Grebes (and some Divers) are lovers  
their sequence of rituals is longer than others'.  
Each separate display seems to act as the trigger  
to the next, then the next – so the sequence grows bigger.

Like all birds it begins with a cock and hen meeting  
sublimation of threat is then followed by greeting,  
head-shaking comes first, then a sequence of things  
like ritual mock-preening their backs and their wings.  
They then swim apart, ruffs outspread, crests erect,  
and silently dive, leave the surface ring-flecked,  
No birds to be seen? Some watchers depart  
presuming it's over. But others are smart,  
remembering this is the nest-building season  
and the two mated birds have dived deep for a reason.  
They're planning a nest made of water-logged weeds,  
all leaves of the species of water-side reeds.  
They bob up like corks, making rings on the surface  
with beakfuls that seem just ideal for the purpose  
of building a nest. But keep watching! They turn,  
each facing the other, their hearts seem to burn  
as they paddle so swiftly to narrow the gap,  
till they rise as they meet with a splash and a slap  
of webbed feet on the water, and everywhere spray  
a breast-to-breast clash. Yet it's only display,  
for those beakfuls of weed are just thrown away  
as, like two upright bottles, they gradually sink  
to the normal position of bird or of boat,  
not splashing like mad to keep upright and float!

For me it's worth waiting in early March light  
for their weed dance, a truly spectacular sight.  
As soon as it's over they head-shake together,  
and swim to the site where, whatever the weather,  
they will build their nest platform for further displays,  
like mating to fertilise the eggs the hen lays.  
Each stage of their programme, the size of the batch  
the sharing of duties until the eggs hatch,  
one sitting, one diving and searching for food,  
both programmed by nature to safeguard the brood  
of little striped nestlings, their foreheads adorned  
with patches of skin like clear signals that warned  
of a shortage of food when their hunger pangs grow,  
and they switch on a warning light brightly aglow.

Evolution explains how such features succeed  
in equipping each species with tools that they need,  
but harder by far is the need to explain  
how behaviour evolved in the nerves of the brain  
so that each generation can pass to the next

the relevant programme. This problem perplexed  
an eminent scientist, an Oxford Professor  
called Julian Huxley, no uninformed guesser,  
but eager to get at hard facts in his studies.  
Informed of the presence of grebes by his buddies  
he went to the gravel pits nearby at Tring  
and decided that here was a wonderful thing  
for a busy professor in need of a break:  
he'd go for a holiday, sit by a lake,  
enjoy watching birds and perhaps collect data  
he could analyse back in his laboratory later.  
In fact he was truly astonished to find  
such a wealth of material. It quite blew his mind.  
The result was a book, a new look at zoology,  
and the founding of a discipline labelled Ethology.  
In praising Great-crested Grebes to the skies,  
his advice to all bird-watchers: "Go do likewise!"