

Keeping Nature A-Float

At a time when many of our parklands are a flurry of activity and the exuberant courtship displays of birds fill the air, one species stands apart in its demonstrations of infatuation and fidelity. In the bird world, the Western grebe's (*Aechmophorus occidetalis*) energetic courtship ceremonies are among the most visible and graceful. Their spectacular "rushing" display, in which both members of the pair stand upright with head and neck erect and race across the water in unison, is pure poetry in motion.



A Western grebe with three young.

These sleek, ballroom dressed birds are elegant! They are two-toned in color (black and white) and have long, sharply pointed fish-catching bills. The Western grebe is the largest of our North American grebes. They nest in marshes and reservoirs of Western U.S. and Canada. Howard Cogswell, author of *Waterbirds of California*, and former East Bay Regional Park District Board of Director (1970-1982) was the first scientist to

report that some populations of Western grebes were declining as a result of reduced nesting habitat caused by lake drainage. Recently, they were given a conservation priority of "high concern" by the Intermountain West Waterbird Conservation Plan, published by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



Volunteers install a Western grebe nest platform.

For information or to become a Wildlife Volunteer call or email
Dave "Doc Quack" Riensche, Wildlife Resource Analyst
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A Western grebe on a platform at Quarry Lakes Regional Recreation Area.

Thus, the stage was set for an exciting opportunity to engineer a solution to improve Western grebe nesting success in reservoirs with rapidly fluctuating water levels. Thanks to the dedication and determination of Adam Shawen, John Mena and other Wildlife Volunteers, the cure has been found! By taking into consideration the design constraints around fluctuating water levels, and the nesting requirements of the grebes, we have developed the first successful artificial floating grebe nest platform in Western North America! This breakthrough in artificial floating nest platform design and construction at Quarry Lakes Regional Recreation Area in Fremont could have a "ripple effect" for special status wetland dependent birds such as the trumpeter swan (*Cygnus buccinator*) of the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

While technological advancement and adaptive management strategies help preserve our wildlife species, it's really the people like you who rally around the conservation cause that make success happen! Thanks to the donations made to the Regional Parks Foundation by private citizens, and the Alameda Countywide Clean Water Program, Alameda County Fish and Wildlife Commission, Chevron, and Fremont Bank Foundation, we are accomplishing great things for wildlife. We encourage you to visit the park to witness this wonderful achievement and join with us in "Keeping Nature A-Float".

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