

# Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher, Jim Butler

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## GREBE STORY 2:

Let's continue the Australasian Grebe story. To recap: this small grebe is found on local ponds and dams where it forages underwater, feeds and nests on the surface, rarely comes out of the water and it gains very striking feather and skin colours for the breeding season. This grebe can both baffle and intrigue children by diving silently, disappearing for about thirty seconds and then reappearing in an unpredictable spot a long way away.

Grebes forage underwater for about 80% of daylight hours. Therefore, they spend a long part of the day underwater, holding their breath. When they come back to the surface they replenish the oxygen in their blood. The inter-dive recovery time increases with dive duration, which increases with water depth, hence feeding at greater depths is less efficient than in shallow water. Feeding success also declines with depth of the water; hence, the observed preference for shallow water by foraging grebes.

Grebes build floating nests made from green aquatic vegetation into which eggs are laid. Adult grebes



deliberately cover their eggs with weed when they leave the nest. Both parents raise the striped, red-faced chicks. Initially the young will ride on the parent's back, hidden between their slightly raised wings. When the chicks begin to dive and feed themselves, at about 10 weeks, they disperse.

Grebes can float high or low, that is to say, they can manipulate their buoyancy by their unusual plumage. Their plumage is dense and waterproof which allows them to either trap large air bubbles which make them very buoyant and float high; or they can press their feathers against their body which excludes trapped air and their buoyancy is reduced and they float low. This is useful for either carrying the young (float high) or for diving (float low).

Happy watching for young grebes!

~ Jim

Photo: Adult Grebe with two young  
Image: Ed Frazer, Brookfield ©