



Numerous birds are found on Maori Lakes, (left) including scaup, paradise duck, bittern, pied stilt, marsh crake (pictured above) and pukeko. The threat of an irrigation scheme hung over the lakes but has since receded. They are now Wildlife Refuges. Photo: Donald Geddes.

Recreational uses also pose a threat to the natural values of the area. There is a shortage of water for power boating and windsurfing. Currently power boating is restricted to Lake Camp but it is overcrowded at peak times. Windsurfing has a rapidly growing following and windsurfers are looking beyond Lake Clearwater that they share with yachts. It has had a marked effect on bird numbers on Lake Clearwater. One of the reasons why Lynn and Neville

# The Southern Crested Grebe - A Bird of Value

by Jim Ackerley

The southern crested grebe was once found throughout New Zealand but is now confined to lakes from Canterbury southwards. It is an endangered species with an estimated total population of a mere 250 birds, which are losing the struggle to survive in what has become a hostile environment. Their numbers are decreasing because of the destruction of their high country lake habitat.

The first European to record the southern crested grebe (*Podiceps cristatus*) was Charles Heaphy in 1846 at Lake Rotoroa in the Nelson province. This was confirmed by others such as Governor George Grey and Julius Van Haast who added to the limited knowledge of these unusual birds.

The Ashburton lakes at present provide habitat for the greatest number of grebes in the country but the lake with the largest individual population is Lake Alexandria which is adjacent to Lake Tekapo. My own studies of the birds have been at Lake Clearwater, about 60 kms from Ashburton in mid-Canterbury. I have been fascinated by their unique mode of living and their individual habits which are so different from other birds.

## Mate for life

The grebe is about the size of a mallard duck, darkly coloured on the back with a white breast, a long slender neck with two dark crests on their head and a chestnut coloured ruff that can be extended as a fan either in courtship or when facing an intruder. The male bird is stockier in build and is more dominant. They have a strong bond between them and they mate for life. Completely aquatic, they have legs which emerge at the extreme rear of their body, explained in the latin "Podiceps" (Podicis — rump, pes — foot). Their feet are not webbed like most other water birds but have three broad lobes which assist in diving and underwater swimming. Because of their physical build they cannot stand on land and must feed, mate, nest and live on the water. Grebes dive for their food of mainly nymphs and small fish, remaining underwater for a long time as they have an

amazing ability to navigate while they are submerged. Though reluctant fliers they move from lake to lake for food or in search of a new habitat. In flight they resemble a black shag but show their white breast and throat and have a rapid wing beat.

Their nesting requirements are most specific and suitable sites are not plentiful. At Lake Clearwater we have had a pair of grebes nesting close to the holiday village for several years. They have an ideal site in a large willow which has extended over the water with its lower branches semi-submerged to a depth of about 60 cm. The grebes build their nest in a fork of these branches using weed plucked from the lake bed and lock the structure with twigs from the tree.

## Strongly Territorial

They establish strong territorial claims and rigidly enforce their rights against all other



The rare crested grebe with a youngster on its back. The Ashburton Lakes are a stronghold for this fascinating bird, whose New Zealand population stands at only 250. Photo: Donald Geddes