



Australasian crested grebe/ kāmāna

Native birds

The handsome Australasian crested grebe belongs to an ancient order of diving water birds found on every continent in the world. It is renowned for its mating displays and the way young grebes ride among plumage on the back of their swimming parents. Three of the 22 species in this order have become extinct in the last 30 years. The Australasian crested grebe has a fine, sharp bill, slender neck and head with a distinctive black double crest. Cheeks have chestnut frills, fringed black.

Photos: G. Chance



Where is it found?

At least 100 South Island lakes once had grebes but there have been ongoing declines in Marlborough, on the West Coast and in Fiordland. Only Canterbury and Otago remain as strongholds. It is estimated that between 300 and 400 widely-dispersed birds remain in the South Island of New Zealand and they are fully protected.

Grebe facts

- Māori call the birds kāmāna, and regard them as taonga/treasure.
- Grebes live on alpine and sub-alpine lakes throughout the year, although some migrate to Lake Forsyth/Te Wairewa on Banks Peninsula for winter.



Did you know?

Grebes are well known for their elaborate water courtship rituals. In spring for instance, you might see the birds swimming slowly with their long, thin necks extended, shaking their heads at each other with ruffs and crests erect, and trilling or calling in long series of haunting calls. Different grebe courtship patterns have received names such as 'the penguin dance' and 'weed dance'.

- They live on lakes of various sizes but require vegetation along the lake margins for nesting and shelter from rough weather. Floating nests are attached to submerged vegetation.
- They breed from September to March. Pairs are formed through elaborate ritualised courtship and mating displays for which the grebes have become renowned. They are monogamous and sustain their pair bonds throughout the year.
- Clutch size ranges from one to seven eggs. Incubation and parental care of young is shared, with chicks often carried on their parent's back. They swim and dive after one week but don't become independent until they are 11 weeks old.
- Their legs are set well back on their bodies to enhance their diving skills, at the expense of mobility on land. For this reason, the birds rarely, if ever, come ashore.
- They feed on small fish, insects and water weeds. Feathers are swallowed to prevent bones passing into the gut and are regurgitated periodically.

Threats

Kāmana have declined mainly due to introduced predators and to loss of habitat through drainage of wetlands, and the establishment of hydro schemes. Nests can be stranded or flooded by artificial fluctuations in lake levels. Wash generated by motorised water craft can also swamp nests and destroy eggs while the noise can scare adult birds leaving eggs or chicks exposed to the cold or predators.

Animals like stoats, cats and raptors can prey on eggs and fledglings, and introduced fish and birds compete for food and breeding space.

A refuge for kāmana

Lake Pearson/Moana Rua in Canterbury has been designated a wildlife refuge to help protect the grebe. It is one of the few remaining breeding sites for kāmana, and their numbers appear to have remained stable here for several decades.

Wildlife refuge status is one of New Zealand's highest forms of legal protection for terrestrial and aquatic wildlife habitats. This designation allows the Minister of Conservation to exercise discretion over permissible activities on the lake and its margins. For instance, there are restrictions on motorised boats on the lake and predator control measures will hopefully allow grebes to increase their numbers in years to come.

How can you help?

When visiting grebe habitat, leave your dogs (or other pets) at home and move quietly and carefully around lake edges. Nests abandoned by panicking adults leave eggs vulnerable to stress and predators.

Keep boat speed low near lake margins to prevent wakes that can swamp nests or chicks, especially during the breeding season.

For more information

Visit the DOC website at www.doc.govt.nz or contact your local DOC conservancy.

Photos: G. Chance

