

Dancing Grebes

Todd Epp

A marsh becomes the stage for an ancient mating performance.



Paul Hoested

Western grebes dance across the water as part of their mating ritual.

THE BALLET IS PLAYING, but the stage is a marsh, the dancers are grebes, the critics are blackbirds, and the family sedan is the best seat in the house.

The springtime ballet that plays at Oakwood Lakes State Park, about 20 miles northwest of Brookings, is "The Mating Dance," performed by pairs of western grebes. Nature enthusiasts can see the birds and their tippy-toe dances atop the water on the south end of the Oakwood Lakes, just north of the park entrance.

Drive slowly and either park well off the side of the road or drive a little farther north to a small pull-off on the east side of the road, then walk back to the marshy area where the grebes are performing. Stand still, bring a camera (and a long lens), then wait for the performance to begin.

Western grebes, according to *A Guide to Field Identification: Birds of North American*, are black and white with a long, straight neck, and a yellow, needle-like bill. Male and female western grebes are both the same color. They also have piercing, nearly unblinking, scarlet eyes.

Western grebes are 18 inches long with a 40-inch wingspan. In comparison, grebes are smaller than a Canada goose but larger than a mallard duck.

The birds winter along the Pacific Coast. Western grebes breed in lake vegetation like Oakwood. They summer from western Minnesota to the South Dakota Missouri River valley, into the Canadian prairie provinc-



Western grebes engage in dance.

es, across to the Northwest and down into central California.

In this Oakwood Lakes marsh, a place of wet, moldy smells, a place that is sometimes neither land nor water, the western grebes stage their mating dance. In pairs, the birds flit across the water in unison, momentarily defying gravity and aquatics, glide to a stop, then swim as a pair. In mirror image with necks arched, they glide effortlessly in an ancient mating performance.

On quiet, windless days, visitors can hear the grebes' call – *kerr-reeek, kerr-reeek* – a sound much like crinkling styrofoam, except much louder. Then viewers might hear a *ftttt, ftttt, ftttt* sound, and there will be two grebes engaged in another dance number atop the water.

As the grebes dance and swim on a warm, still, spring evening, with the sun casting a golden hue on the cattails and long shadows upon the water, the Oakwood marsh is the very definition of life.

Yellow-headed and red-winged blackbirds cling to cattail stalks. The cattails bob rhythmically in the wind, a choir loft on springs for the garrulous blackbirds. While perched below a fuzzy cattail head, the blackbirds mark their territory, call for mates and seemingly critique the grebes' performance with alternating screeches and whistles.

A muskrat might swim along the reeds just feet from shore. A pair of Canada geese protects its nest off in the

reeds. Cormorants and great blue herons flap their large wings lazily overhead, on their way to aeries in dead trees.

My four-year-old daughter Sarah and I observe and delight in the grebes' ancient antics from atop our Ford Bronco parked on the edge of the road that bisects the marshes. With long lenses and field glasses in hand, we sit in the warm, springtime sun and peer into the grebes' domain. "Look, Sarah!" I exclaim. "Look at them dance!" "Cool, Dad! Let me see," my daughter responds. At that shared, precious, moment in time and nature, my life is perfect. If transcendence is a measure of art, then the dancing grebes are artists without peer.

Down the road from Oakwood, farmers engage in the more recent South Dakota springtime rhythms and traditions of plowing and planting. A little farther on, in the cities like Brookings and Sioux Falls, the natural springtime rhythms might lead to gardening and mowing.

But in this glacially carved theater-in-the-round, some of eastern South Dakota's oldest rhythms of continuity sing and dance, thanks to a cast of graceful grebes and their riparian partners. ■

Todd Epp is a keen observer of South Dakotans and of South Dakota's outdoors.