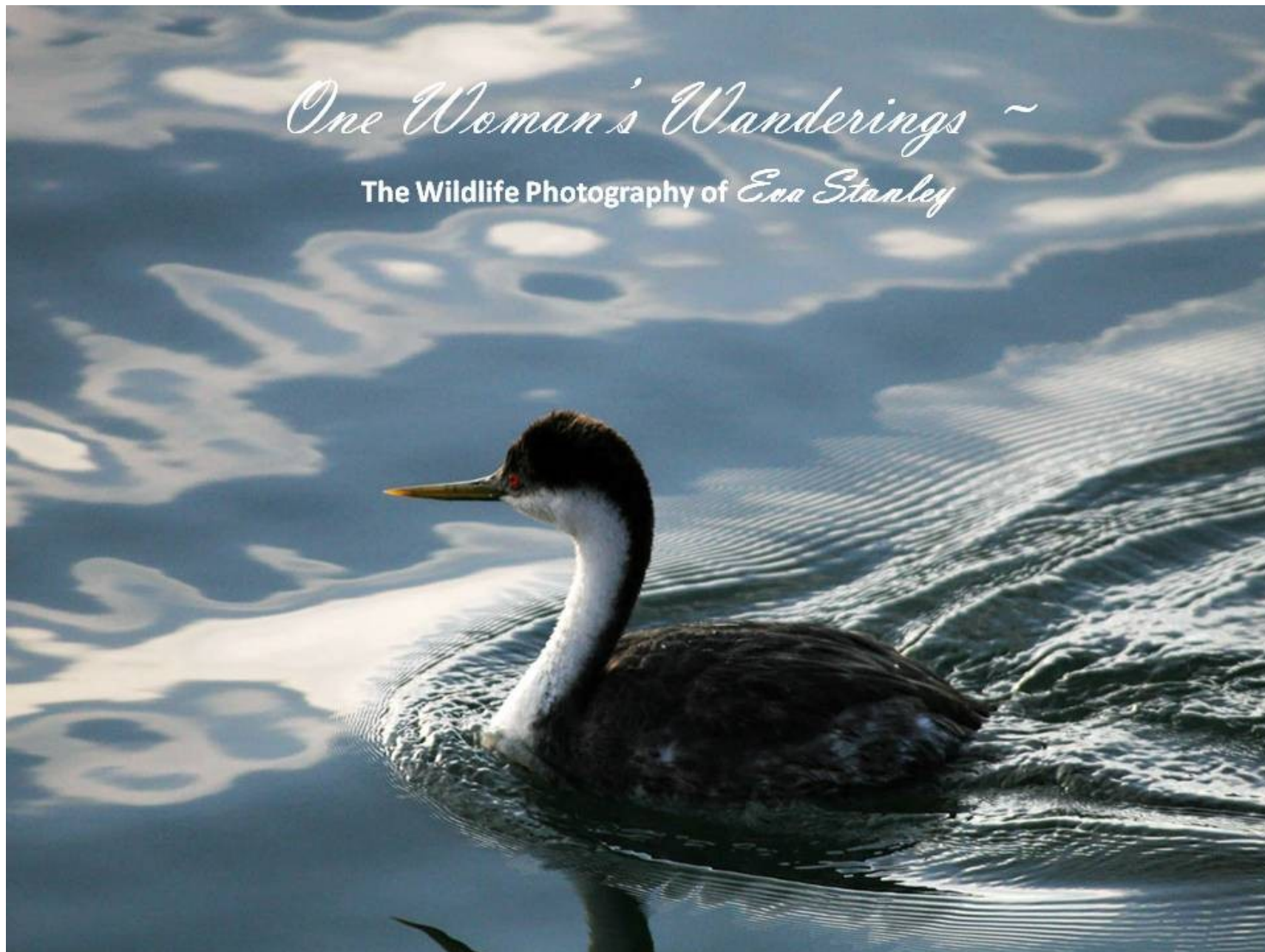


One Woman's Wanderings ~

The Wildlife Photography of *Eva Stanley*



Editor's Note

by Eva Stanley

As per the request of many of my friends, this is the launch of a proposed new wildlife magazine, created from the slant of woman traveling the country alone to do her photography.

As a wildlife artist (carver, sculptor and painter), my photography has developed over the years as a vehicle to experience first-hand the lives and habitats of my subject matter, and as a visual record and reference from which to work in the studio. And along the way, I am continually expanding my knowledge base of how the natural world functions.

From Prince Edward Island and Nova Scotia to southern California, Washington state to the southern tip of Florida, I have crisscrossed the United States and lower Canada, in search of our native wildlife. Traveling mostly alone with a pickup camper, and my cat, Quinn, we have had some truly amazing adventures along the way! And so often throughout our journeys, we have sent e-mails to old and new friends across the country, sharing some of the wildlife we have encountered along the way. And the response has continually been, "You should write a book!" This is my attempt to share more of what I have seen and experienced with more people. To bring you up close to creatures who share our world, so that you will know their beauty, their fragility, their strengths, and their world.

I hope you will enjoy this first issue of *One Woman's Wanderings*.

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House Finch fledgling, Loveland, Colorado
© Eva Stanley

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The Western Grebe



Western Grebe, December, Moss Landing, California © Eva Stanley

The Grebe family consists of 20 species worldwide, 6 of which live in North America. I think the Western Grebe is one of our most elegant. Graceful and sleek, this is the grebe often featured on television for its unique courtship dance. The pair rears up, side-by-side, and with their wings back and bodies held out of the water, necks arched, they point their bills toward the sky and race across the water. The western grebe is a highly gregarious bird year-round. As nesting season approaches, this mating display ritual is often performed by multiple pairs at the same time.

Considered a medium-sized water bird, the western grebe is our largest grebe. Grebes have no known relatives, though may have once been related to the loon. Certainly by physical characteristics, that does not seem so far fetched. Like the loon, the western grebe's legs are positioned far back under the body, making it extremely awkward when walking on land. But in the water, it is one of the most perfectly adapted diving and swimming birds. In the face of danger, this bird would rather dive for cover than take flight.

The western grebe has lobed (partially webbed) feet, similar to a coot's- though again, the two are unrelated. This special adaptation gives the grebe powerful maneuverability and speed when chasing prey underwater. The spear-like greenish-yellow bill of the western grebe is sharp and slender with saw-like edges which help provide an excellent grip when your diet consists primarily of small slippery fish (carp, catfish, perch, bluegill, herring, and others). A western grebe's diet also includes such extras as crabs, mollusks, marine worms, salamanders, plus insects such as grasshoppers, beetles, mayflies, and water boatmen! And they also consume feathers. Talk about recycling! With quality water conditions, this varied diet makes this grebe highly adaptable to available food sources. But it also makes this bird more vulnerable to man's carelessness of chemical contamination, gill nets, and oil spills. Grebe fossils have been found back as far as the end of the Pleistocene epoch of 11,000 years ago. At the turn of the 20th century, tens of thousands of western grebes were killed for their breast feathers to be used in women's hats. With protection, the population has recovered, and today is expanding their range.



The lobed feet of the western grebe help provide excellent maneuverability when chasing prey underwater.

With a 30" - 40" wingspan, the western grebe is not considered a strong flier. But they do migrate—mostly east to west, and back again, traveling in loose flocks at night.

Migration is timed in March and early September to correlate with food supply and weather conditions. The majority of the population alternates between their summer breeding grounds of western inland lakes and occasional coastal marshes across the western United States and Canada (venturing as far east as Manitoba and Minnesota), and back to their winter habitat of open inland waters and sheltered coastal bays and estuaries of the Pacific Ocean.



Summer pair, early June, Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming © Eva Stanley

As with loons, the grebe requires a running start across the water to become airborne, so open water is a necessity.

The western grebe is a strikingly beautiful bird with its sharply contrasting black and white plumage on head and long neck (often appearing to have a classic and comical flat-top crew-cut hairdo). and its bright scarlet red eyes. As with most ocean going creatures, the back plumage is a medium gray color, and the belly is white for camouflage. In flight, there is a white patch visible on each wing. Males and females have similar plumage color, but the male is larger and the bill shape is somewhat different.



Winter grebe, December, Moss Landing, California © Eva Stanley

The pair is monogamous, and they work together to create a floating nest in a shallow freshwater marsh, near open water. The nest consists of heaped plant material such as tules and rushes, usually free-floating, although sometimes anchored by roots or other plants. Beginning mid-May, the female will generally lay 3-4 pale green or buff colored eggs. Both parents will take turns incubating the eggs over the next 23-24 days. Because western grebes enjoy each other's company, pairs will nest close together, defending only their immediate territory from each other. And they will leave the nest, swimming underwater, out to feeding grounds to avoid confrontation with neighboring pairs. After hatching, western grebe chicks, covered in gray down, leave the nest almost immediately, climbing aboard their parents' backs to begin life on the water. In the early days, the chicks will ride and rest on their parents, staying on-board during their dives for food. Dives are usually up to 20 feet deep, and generally last about 30 seconds. Both parents will protect and feed their young, teaching them the ways of being grebe, and sometime between 63 and 70 days, the young will be ready to take their first flights.



Western Grebe, December, Moss Landing, California © Eva Stanley

This morning, I awoke thinking about what vastly different kinds creatures these grebes would encounter in their summer and winter habitats. And the more I thought about it, the more overlap I came up with. Summer freshwater lakes might bring raccoons, opossums, coyotes, fox, moose, bears, and pond turtles. But the overlap of similar species in both areas would include shorebirds, herons and egrets, gulls, white pelicans vs. brown pelicans, river otters vs. sea otters. Winter quarters would include such interesting saltwater species as crabs, starfish, dolphins, harbor seals, and sea lions.

Though I have not yet been lucky enough to see the western grebes' courtship displays and babies, I have been privileged to observe and photograph adults, both in their summering grounds on lakes in the Yellowstone region of Wyoming, Montana, and Idaho, as well as their wintering grounds along the California coast in places like Moss Landing.

The Yellowstone region photography happened in early June, not long after the Park opened from its winter sleep. In places, there was still snow on the ground. The day was warm with a delicious breeze. Mountain wildflowers were in bloom, and bees and butterflies were busily going about their nectar-seeking business. In this more remote location, the grebes seemed wary of humans presence. Once I settled down, camera in hand, to soak in the sun on the shore, they chose a safe distance and went on about their business of socializing with each other and diving for food. Watching them interact with each other made this a special day.

The wintering western grebes of the California coast were somewhat more accepting of people in the area. I was able to photograph twice at Moss Landing in December. Once, on a sunny cool quiet morning in the harbor area, and again in the late afternoon of a partly cloudy day. That late afternoon light, coupled with the clouds created some wonderful abstract shapes and colors on the gentle swells of the bay, highlighting the wake of the swimming grebe. Each time I have had the pleasure of photographing these birds, it has been a memorable experience and a real treat!

