

FEATURE ARTICLES

**RED-NECKED GREBES BECOME SEMICOLONIAL WHEN PRIME NESTING
SUBSTRATE IS AVAILABLE**

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Abstract. During 1995–1998 we studied the dynamics of nesting dispersion in a population of 160–200 Red-necked Grebes (*Podiceps grisegena*) on Lake Osakis, a large, windblown lake in central Minnesota. Breeding grebe pairs arriving on the lake were highly attracted to several large floating cattail (*Typha angustifolia*) mats that had broken off and drifted away from the mainland to become “islands” snagged within rooted emergent beds. These mats provided prime nesting habitat protected from waves and predators that was chosen by nearly 40% of the breeding population. Most pairs establishing nests on the islands averaged 5–10 simultaneously active neighbors within 50 m, compared to pairs that established territories along the shoreline, most of which had no neighbors within 50 m. The overall success of the two strategies varied widely from year to year, depending on the water levels, nesting habitat availability, timing of windstorms, and predator activity. During most years, however, pairs that established nests on the mats hatched earlier in the season and had larger clutches and broods. The dense mats appeared to provide protection from wind and wave action, the primary cause of early nest loss. Our blood analysis work showed no genetic structure of the population and no tendency for neighbors to be closely related. However, pairs often returned to the same area and type of nesting situation in subsequent years. The behavioral flexibility of Red-necked Grebe pairs to nest in groups within prime habitat areas may enable them to breed successfully within unpredictable emergent wetland habitats.

Key words: coloniality, intraspecific variability, nesting dispersion, *Podiceps grisegena*, Red-necked Grebe, spacing, territoriality.