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## NOTEBOOK

# New breeding records of Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* and Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* at the northern limit of their Asian range

WIELAND HEIM, FRIEDRICH EIDAM & SERGEI M. SMIRENSKI

## Introduction

Knowledge of avian species distribution in the Amur region is very limited. Since 2011 we have been running the Amur Bird Project at Muraviovka Park (Heim *et al.* 2012, Heim & Smirenski 2013), a private nature reserve, south-east of Blagoveshchensk on the Zeya-Bureya plain in the Amur region of Far East Russia. During our work for the Amur Bird Project, we have confirmed breeding of Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* and Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* in the area, thereby extending their known breeding ranges.

During our fieldwork we observed waterfowl on Kapustikha Lake, near Muraviovka Park headquarters (49.919°N 127.672°E) on a daily basis during autumn 2011 and 2012 and from spring to autumn 2013. The lake, a cut-off meander of the Amur, has rich aquatic vegetation and is fringed by reeds (Plate 1). A wide-ranging breeding bird survey was undertaken in 2013 in and around Muraviovka, covering about 10,000 ha of cultivated fields and wetlands. All parts were visited at least once between May and July and all bird observations were mapped (Heim *et al.* in prep.). Nests, eggs and fledglings were determined following Harrison & Castell (1998).

## Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis*

The eastern race *poggei* of the Little Grebe is known to breed in Japan, Korea, east China and south-

east Russia, although not in the Amur region (Brazil 2009, BirdLife International 2014, Llimona *et al.* 2014). The first record of the species in upper Amurland was in October 2007, when an adult female was caught on the Tom River (Dymin *et al.* 2009). Sightings have since increased and the species is now known as a rare migrant and summer visitor at Muraviovka Park. In 2012 breeding in the Amur region was confirmed when 11 nests were found on an artificial pond near Blagoveshchensk (V. A. Duginov *in litt.* 2013).

At Kapustikha Lake, we observed up to five Little Grebe almost daily during September 2011 and 2012. From 27 May to early June 2013 the species was seen on a small temporary well-vegetated water-body in a field, where a nest was found on 20 June (Plate 2). It was built between the branches of a semi-submerged *Salix* sp. and contained seven cold eggs (36.2 mm × 26.8 mm), some of which were damaged (Plate 3); evidently the nest was abandoned and no adult birds were seen. In the preceding week the water level had fallen about 50 cm with the area of the water-body decreasing by about 90%, which may have caused the adults to desert the nest. On 30 July 2013, a successful brood was found on a small shallow water-body north of Kurapatina village (Plate 4), where an adult bird was observed with a fully-fledged chick. An empty nest probably constructed

**Plate 1.** Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* breeding site, Kapustikha Lake, Amur region, Far East Russia, 12 July 2013.



**Plate 2.** The temporary water-body where the Little Grebe *Tachybaptus ruficollis* nest was found, 20 June 2013.



by this species was found at the same spot, built between flooded *Artemisia* stands.

### Common Moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*

The Common Moorhen has a wide range in Eurasia and Africa. It appears to be spreading in east Asia and is now found as far north as the Khabarovsk region of Far East Russia. It is known to have bred in the Primorye region since the beginning of the twentieth century and it was assumed to breed on the lower reaches of the Amur (Potapov & Flint 1989). However, despite the published records, recent field guides (e.g. Brazil 2009) do not list the species for the Amur region. The first nest was reported by Duginov & Pankin (1995) west of Blagoveshchensk, and since 2000 it has been recorded annually on small lakes and artificial ponds around the city, in the Ivanovsky region (V. A. Duginov *in litt.* 2013), the Khingansky Nature Reserve (Antonov & Parilov 2010) and the Doldikan River (Antonov *in press*).

A fully grown first-year Common Moorhen was observed at Kapustikha Lake between 7 and 15 September 2011. In 2012, we observed a pair feeding a small chick between 29 August and mid-

**Plate 3.** Little Grebe nest with abandoned clutch of eggs, Muraviyovka Park, Amur region, Far East Russia, 20 June 2013.



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**Plate 4.** The small lake north of Kurapatina village, Amur region, Far East Russia, where both Little Grebe and Moorhen have bred, with an old Moorhen nest in the willow to the right, 30 July 2013.



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September and a third adult bird was seen in the same period. When first seen the chick was newly hatched, it grew very slowly and when last seen on 15 September it was very small and weak. Common Moorhen chicks are fed by adults for up to 45 days, fledge at 45–50 days, rarely 70 days, and are independent at 52 days or longer (Glutz von Blotzheim *et al.* 1973, Taylor & van Perlo 1998, Taylor *et al.* 2014). We assume that the chick died and that the adult birds left the area shortly after; only a single adult bird was seen from 15–28 September 2012.

During the 2013 breeding bird survey around Muraviyovka, the first moorhen were seen on 3 June and about ten breeding pairs were observed thereafter. On 30 July, two adult birds were seen a small shallow lake north of Kurapatina; one was feeding a chick while the other was sitting on a nest built between flooded *Artemisia* stands—Taylor & van Perlo (1998) note that first-hatched chicks may be looked after by one parent leaving the other to continue incubating. Another old nest was found nearby between the branches of a semi-submerged willow. Second broods have been observed around Blagoveshchensk, but they have frequently been destroyed by floods (V. A. Duginov *in litt.* 2013). European resident populations, e.g. in urban parks, regularly successfully raise two or more broods (Glutz von Blotzheim *et al.* 1973).

### Discussion

Breeding of Little Grebe and Common Moorhen has been confirmed for the first time at Muraviyovka Park in the Amur region, but it is not known if these species are recent colonists or they have been overlooked. Suitable habitat was undoubtedly available in the past, but may have increased with the establishment of artificial ponds and drainage ditches.

To our knowledge, there have been no investigations of inter-specific competition between Common Moorhen and Eurasian Coot *Fulica atra*. On bigger lakes with open water and reeds, coots generally dominate, while both species can be found sympatrically on small and eutrophic waters (Glutz von Blotzheim *et al.* 1973). Eurasian Coot was a common breeder in Muraviyovka until the 1980s, but has been recorded only once since 2000—on 6 October 2013 a single bird was in the south of the park (P. Fetting, B. Jahnke & S. Klasan *in litt.* 2013). The situation is similar throughout the Amur region and Eurasian Coot is now in the Amur *oblast* Red Data Book (Antonov & Parilov 2009). The reasons for its disappearance are not understood; there is no obvious decline in habitat quality and the impact of hunting is unknown. The

disappearance of Eurasian Coot may explain the Common Moorhen range expansion, as could climate change, although in northern Europe the Common Moorhen has yet to benefit from global warming (Brommer 2004) and there are no data for the populations in north-east Asia.

The late breeding record of Common Moorhen in September 2012 is probably one of the latest known broods in north-east Asia. In Western Europe breeding may take place until October and in northern Europe small chicks are seen until September (Glutz von Blotzheim *et al.* 1973). Information on the length of the breeding season in Far East Russia is lacking, but birds remain at Khanka Lake until September (Potapov & Flint 1989). The Amur Bird Project will continue to collect data on the avifauna of the middle Amur River with the objective of answering these questions.

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