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Black-necked Grebes thriving on RSPB reserves

In an uplifting success story, the RSPB has confirmed the best year for Black-necked Grebes breeding on their reserves in 2023.

The charity's premier site for the species is St Aidan's, West Yorkshire, where habitat management has paid off. The reserve now hosts some 30% of the UK breeding population of the grebe. Last year [2023], a record 18 breeding pairs were counted, raising hopes that numbers will continue to grow. Careful management of water levels and creation of new areas of shallow water and dense reeds has been undertaken by a dedicated team.

John Ingham, warden at St Aidan's, said: "Black-necked Grebes aren't just one of the rarest breeding birds in the UK - they are also one of the most beautiful. Unmistakable with that piercing red eye, and golden ear tufts, at a distance they may be quite unassuming with their diminutive size, but up close they are simply stunning."



Black-necked Grebe is on the edge of its range in the UK, averaging just over 50 breeding pairs in the last few years (Tim Melling).

St Aidan's success

With the onset of the breeding season, visitors are reminded to stick to designated paths to minimise the risk of disturbance. The peak arrival of breeding birds is expected in mid-April before the grebes become harder to see as they head to the reeds to nest.

Mr Ingham added: "Based on the successful breeding season last year and mild winter, we would hope for good numbers of Black-necked Grebe again this spring at RSPB St Aidan's. But as with much of our wildlife, they face many challenges such as loss of wetland habitats, extreme weather events caused by climate change, declines in small fish and invertebrates they rely on for feeding, predation, and potentially, increased incidences of diseases such as avian influenza.

"These threats make our work to maintain the perfect habitat conditions for wildlife like Black-necked Grebes all the more important, especially if we are to enjoy the arrival of these beautiful birds at RSPB nature reserves for many years to come."

On the edge

The UK is on the edge of Black-necked Grebe's European range, with the population here averaging only 54 pairs over the last five years, putting it on the Amber List of Birds of Conservation Concern.

The small waterbirds nest in shallow wetlands, often in association with Black-headed Gull colonies.

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