

A Whinny, a Bark and a Burp! By Peter and Deana Gadd, Miramichi Naturalist Club. Published in the Miramichi Leader, June 29th, 2011

“Whinny”, “bark” and “burp” ... not sounds that would normally be associated with a freshwater marsh. The evening sounds of the spring peeper, the honk of a Canada Goose and the chatter and call of the Red-winged Blackbird are what we would expect. However these other sounds are often heard and can carry great distances, particularly over water. On hearing these noises a visitor to the Miramichi Marsh, for instance, no doubt will wonder where they are coming from.

Of these the most easily identified is the source of the “bark”. Although not exactly like the bark of a dog in tone, the call of the Pied-billed Grebe is very similar in cadence and sharpness. There can be a sense of urgency detected in the call. The calling grebe, likely visible in the middle of a pond, is a surprisingly small bird to make such a racket. Greyish in colour with subtle markings, this lean looking bird with a black mark on its bill can be amusing to watch. Its behaviour is duck-like in that it swims about apparently effortlessly and can dive, but it is also able to control its buoyancy by removing air trapped in its feathers and can submerge submarine-like, sometimes leaving its head above the surface as a periscope! Unlike ducks both mother and father are involved in raising the young and shortly after hatching young grebes can be seen riding on the parents’ backs. However the young quickly become proficient swimmers and within a few days are chasing after their parents as they surface with freshly caught food such as small fish and leeches.



More mysterious is the source of the “whinny”. A little reminiscent of a horse’s whinny but more shrill, it is the call of the Sora. It is a small, reclusive, well camouflaged wading bird that makes its way around the reeds on the marsh’s edge relying on longish legs that end with extraordinarily long toes. It is well equipped to walk about and search for food in a watery environment although it can be considered an “all-terrain” animal in that it can also swim. An outstanding feature of this migratory bird is its bright yellow beak. In addition to the “whinny” it has a strong whistle that rises in pitch and like the Pied-billed Grebe, its calls can be heard over incredibly long distances for such a small creature. Even so, at times it seems the bird is invisible as locating the source of a call originating nearby can be difficult. It is a

member of the rail family and seemingly increasing in number locally. Both parents, like the Pied-billed Grebe, are involved in incubating the 10 to 12 eggs and raising the young.



The “burp” sound is produced by the American Bittern. It is a large wading bird of the heron family, slightly more than two feet long when standing upright. Its call is a very guttural sound that too can resonate throughout a marsh. The sound is produced by a very extraordinary process that seems to start in the pit of the bird’s stomach and pass up through its body as the body contorts and the head and beak reach up into the air. This sound may be repeated a number of times in succession. This tall bird can often startle a passerby as it suddenly leaps unexpectedly out of the reeds and awkwardly gains altitude and flies off. On occasion this striped brown bird might choose not to flee but rather try to blend in with the surrounding grass even to the point of swaying with the grass in the gentle breeze.



In addition to these unusual sounds June is an interesting time at a fresh water marsh as young birds start to appear and parenting behavior can be observed. When passersby get close to the nest of a Red-winged Blackbird they can expect to be bothered by an agitated male. It is common to see passing Canada Geese with goslings in tow being harassed. The Canada Geese themselves are very protective of their goslings keeping them together, often in a very straight line with one parent in front and the other at the rear, stretching their necks out as they swim off from shore. Humans find that families of ducklings irresistibly cute as they are watched over by their mother, the father is elsewhere, having little to do with raising the young. Songbirds can be seen with captured dragonflies or caterpillars in their mouths on the way to the nest for feeding of the hatchlings.

There can be a lot taking place at a local marsh, that at times can seem like a peaceful and quiet sanctuary for humans and birds alike, but there is much to observe, not just with the eyes but also with the ears including the ukulele-like “strum” of the Green Frog.