

Is there competition between Red-throated Divers and Great Northern Divers in Iceland?

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Present population estimates for Red-throated Divers (RTDs) is 1000-2000 breeding pairs and 300 for Great Northern Divers (GNDs). During past decade information has been collected on breeding site locations of these species in Iceland. The material now includes ca 1000 identified nest sites of RTDs and ca 250 of GNDs.

Analysis of the material clearly shows a general size difference in breeding lochs of the two species. Different general distribution also exists. GNDs nest mostly inland and in highland regions. Most of the RTD population breeds within ca 10 km from sea, and they rarely breed above ca 200m a.s.l. Still the breeding distributions of the two species overlap, as GNDs breed down to coast.

Only rarely is more than one pair of GNDs found on the same lake. Only ca 10 lakes are on record with more than a single pair, mostly the largest lakes in the country. Similarly RTDs and GNDs seldom breed on the same lake. Only around 15 such sites are known. Little is known how long the two species will co-exist on the same lake, when GNDs establish themselves on RTD lakes.

GNDs are well known for their aggressive behaviour on breeding lakes. The pairs seem to vary in aggressiveness and tolerance to other bird species, possibly dependent on the stage of breeding. Many species are known to be attacked, e.g. ducks, Slavonian Grebe, Whooper Swan, as well as Arctic Fox. Many examples exist of birds being killed, even swans, yet these two species sometimes nest only a few meters apart. Examples exist of declines in numbers of ducks and of RTDs following GNDs starting breeding at a new site.

Some general observations can be mentioned where the species co-exist. RTDs usually nest as far away from the GNDs as possible but distance depends on the shape of breeding lake. RTDs usually keep a much lower profile than on lakes without breeding GNDs. The RTD off-duty birds spend much less time on breeding territory than where they breed alone. GNDs may charge RTDs, which respond by flying away or jump on land and stay there until GNDs leave.

Lakes where GNDs and RTDs co-exist clearly could form an interesting study. Quantified observations need to be carried out, including behavioural work.