

Words with Nature - 1



Let's discover the **little grebe** (*Tachybaptus ruficollis*)! This is a small **diving bird** relatively common and **resident** in mainland Portugal, meaning it lives all year round there. Not abundant, is more common in the southern half, so **Algarve** is a good region to watch it.

Despite being often discreet, it can be quite noisy ([listen](#)). It's easier to find from **November to March**, as it is concentrated in some few places, forming small or medium-sized groups. In spring/summer disperses to reproduce, forming pairs.

Lives in shallow wetlands, such as ponds, lakes, small rivers, dams, ditches, coastal lagoons, marshes and even paddy fields (where rice grows). This grebe likes areas with marshy vegetation, such as reedbeds (areas with reeds). Outside the breeding season, you can also see it in more open waters and sheltered estuaries.

Grebes belong to the family Podicipedidae and this word means they have legs near the body rear (*podicis* – rear + *podus* – foot) and this helps them dive quite well!

In Portugal, is the smallest grebe, but it has a fantastic ability to stay submerged and **swim quickly underwater** searching for food. In fact the word *Tachybaptus* comes from *tachus* = fast and *baptō* = to sink under. Its feet have large lobate toes, meaning they have membranes that help it swim and dive (see the photo on the next page).

**Did you know, the little grebe
would rather dive than fly to escape threats?**



Little grebe **weighs** 100 to 140 g and is 25 to 29 cm **long**. Female and male look alike, having a compact body and the typical small grebe shape. On the rear end a “cloud” of feathers gives it a fluffy look. The head is rounded, the dark beak is short, with a light tip and has a yellowish spot near the base. The neck is **S-shaped**. The **breeding plumage** (when it looks nice for mating) may appear very dark, but in the right light, you can see the **red head and neck** (so the name *ruficollis* from *rufus* – red and *collis* – neck). Winter plumage is light brown, with a dark cap.

It's **diet** includes aquatic invertebrates (as insects and their larvae), amphibians (e.g. frogs, newts and tadpoles), molluscs (e.g. freshwater snails), crustaceans and, to a lesser extent, small fishes (up to 11 cm). The **nest** is a floating platform made with plant material near wetlands edges. Lays 4 to 6 **eggs** and both parents hatch them and take care of the young. Sometimes you can see the chicks on their parents' backs (see the photo)!



Discover other **grebes**, the ecosystems and the protected areas where they live in Portugal! Did you know wetlands are more threatened than forests? **Protect wetlands, save water and keep it clean!**

Do the crosswords [HERE](#) and have **FUN!**