

Arctic Loon
28 Oct 1989
Saylorville Reservoir, Polk Co., IA
*Ken Lowder
IBL 65:82

Record Number: 94-AB
Classification: NA

DOCUMENTATION

Ken Lowder, 415 10th Ave., Coralville, IA 52241 [2/23/95]

REFERENCES

Field Reports: none

Records Committee: IBL 65:82

VOTE: 7 NA

NA, First of all, I would like to commend Mr. Lowder for submitting this documentation despite, as he states, this bird has never been reported in the Lower 48. The field marks he describes, the white flanks, thicker bill, larger size, and lack of chin strap are certainly consistent with Arctic Loon. If this species were just a little less rare, I would have no hesitation in accepting the record. In fact, my doubts rest on three factors, the extreme unlikelihood of this bird occurring in the midwest, the difficulty of conclusively separating the bird from Pacific Loon plus the paucity of information about distribution of this species in the US. For now, I am voting conservatively with a hope that others who see Arctic-type Loons will also report them.

NA, A textbook description of an Arctic Loon. Unfortunately, this species is unprecedented not only in Iowa, but in non-coastal areas of the US. The greater problem is understood by the observer. The delay between the observation and the written description seriously compromises the case. While memories can be very sharp, there remains the possibility of influence from books, conversations, and the passage of time. In view of the importance of a record such as this, a conservative position is warranted. Based upon the description, this could have been another "Bean Goose" -- a completely unprecedented and unexpected addition to Iowa's list.

NA, I think the details are convincing, but "Advanced Birding" calls this ID unresolvable in winter.

NA, Size of bird and description of bill make this a likely Common Loon, perhaps in some kind of funky molt. Preening and feather arrangement can also make the flanks appear white at the waterline.

NA, Ken has analyzed this record as well as I can. I would worry about an odd Common Loon. The first Common Loon that I looked at after reviewing this record showed white above the waterline. I talked to another birder who was there at the time of the sighting who had no doubt that the bird was a Common Loon. In my experience, Common Loons show lots of variation in size and plumage in the fall.

NA, Advanced Birding, pg. 28-29, a white patch is usually absent on swimming Pacific Loon, so this appears not to be a diagnostic field mark. Size difference on Arctic vs. Pacific does not overlap but is quite subjective and hard to quantify in writing. Cramp, et al., Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, pg. 50-55, does not mention white sides, states winter plumage of *G. a. viridigularis* and *G. a. pacifica* indistinguishable (includes *G. a. arctica*).

NA, While the details are convincing, I would like to see more discussion of differences from Pacific Loon -- is Arctic more like Common than Pacific? (Walsh article suggests intermediate in size).

16 September, 1994

Thomas H. Kent, MD
211 Richards
Iowa City, IA
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Dear Tom,

At the understandable risk of appearing ludicrous, I would like to report to the Iowa Records Committee the sighting of an Arctic Loon in Iowa. Let me tell you about the circumstances of what happened.

My friend and fellow birder, John Daniel of Cedar Rapids, IA, and I saw the bird at the dam at Saylorville Lake on 10-28-89. The day was warm and sunny. We were right on the dam at a range to the bird of about 50-60 yards in mid-afternoon, so the sun was at our backs allowing for very good observation. We both had spotting scopes. I use a Kowa TSN-4 and John has a Swift Spacemaster. Both of us have been birding for several years. We had seen many Common Loons previously. Additionally, we have both seen Pacific Loon in Iowa, John having discovered the first Pacific Loon recorded in Linn County. I have also seen Red-throated Loon both in Iowa and in California. Neither of us has ever observed Yellow-billed Loon. Both of us were convinced rather quickly that the bird we saw looked and acted differently from other loons that we had seen before. I'll cover those details later. After we had returned home, I began looking through my library and found the article by Terry Walsh in Birding, Volume XX, Number 1, pp 12-28. I called John's attention to the article which he also read. We both agreed that if the information in the article was accurate, we had seen an Arctic Loon. However, because at that time, there had never been a record of this bird in the lower forty-eight states, and because we did not have a photograph of the bird, neither of us wished to report the sighting. Quite frankly, we did not wish to be ridiculed for reporting such a far-fetched, unlikely event.

In late September, 1994, I went on a pelagic trip out of Monterey, California, and met Geri Langham of Sacramento, CA, who was the leader of the trip. In dinner conversation with Geri, I learned that he was a member of the California Records Committee. In the course of our conversation, I told him (while encouraging him not to laugh) that I had seen an Arctic Loon in Iowa. To my surprise, Geri didn't laugh; instead he asked me why I thought the bird had been an Arctic

Loon. When I told him, he strongly encouraged me to belatedly report the bird. He added that California is about to accept a sighting of Arctic Loon. I promised Geri that I would report the bird and send him a copy of my report.

I recognize that this sighting is very unlikely to be accepted. I have no photograph; no other records to my knowledge have been accepted in the lower 48 states to date for Arctic Loon, and a long intervening time period has elapsed since the observation. I simply wish to submit this report for the scientific record.

The loon that we saw was in winter plumage. It was slowly moving about and occasionally diving in the area just offshore from the Saylorville Dam. Common Loons were also present allowing for easy size comparisons. As I mentioned previously, the light was excellent the day being sunny and warm, the range I would estimate at 50-60 yards. There was negligible wind, the surface water conditions were calm. In short, the conditions for observation were excellent. The bird was very different from the other loons there in that there was a striking amount of white showing above the waterline and in the bird's flank and throat/neck area. Our bird had a very obvious band of white extending back along the waterline of the swimming bird to nearly the tail. This white area showing above the waterline was not a minimal observation. It was very prominent. Additionally, there were conspicuous white flank patches on the bird. There was a large, very prominent white area in the throat and neck. There was no chin strap. The white area in the bird's head extended well back to the auricular area and up to just below the eye. The line along the side of the neck separating the white area in the throat from the dark back of the neck was not a clear, sharp demarcation or line, but rather a more gradual change from the clear white in the throat to the dark top of the head and back of the neck. We did not observe any striping in the neck at all. The white area on our bird extended down to the waterline of the swimming bird in the chest area. I emphasize again that the thing that caught our attention about the bird was the large amount of white showing in the head/neck, waterline, and the flank areas. The back of the bird, top of the head, back of the neck were all uniformly dark. In fact, the bird's size and overall appearance seemed comparable to the other Common Loons until we noticed all the white on the bird. If you refer to the Walsh article, please look at Plate Ten on page 20 as this is the appearance the bird gave us. I had checked this article within a few days of our observation and I can report this with confidence. Our bird did not appear as it does in Plate Eleven - the difference being more white in the upper neck and side of the head in the bird we saw.

Another feature of this bird was quite striking. It acted differently from the Common Loons. When it dove, it "reared back" its head, as though it were "winding up" for the dive. The Common Loons did not do this. In the Walsh

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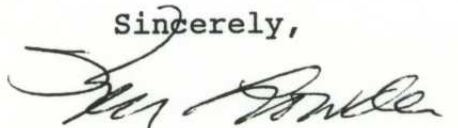
article, this behavior is discussed. On page 26 of his article, Walsh states that "both Pacific and Arctic Loons have similar diving motions." I do not believe our bird was a Pacific Loon. I base this judgement on overall body size, bill size, and the distribution of white coloration in the head/neck, waterline, and flank areas. Our bird was essentially similar size-wise to the accompanying Common Loons. The bill was also similar to Common Loon. It was not upturned and thin as I would have expected with Red-throated Loon.

Several times during our observation of this bird, it rolled to the side to preen/scratch itself. We had great views of the undersurface of the bird. I only can recall remarking how much white we saw. Knowing what I know now, I would have been looking for a vent strap as reported in the June, 1989, Schulenberg article in Birding, Vol. XXI, No. 3, pp. 154-158. At this point, I can only report that I do not recall whether a vent strap was present on this bird or not. Obviously, the presence of a vent strap would have strongly suggested that our bird was a Pacific Loon.

If you have any questions, I would be happy to discuss this sighting with you further.

cc Geri Langham

Sincerely,



Ken Lowder

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