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FRONT COVER: Mississippi Kite, Clive, Polk County, July 1991. Photo by Reid Allen.

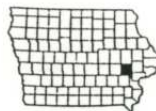
INSIDE BACK COVER: Editorial Staff, Subscription/Membership Information, Instructions to Authors, Officers, Board of Directors, Standing Committees.

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A COUNTY BIG YEAR

THOMAS H. KENT



Many birders like to play games that involve finding species of birds in defined areas over defined periods of time. Games are a strong motivator of human behavior and tend to stimulate research, planning, and intensive activity. Personally, I get much more out of my birding activities if I have a plan or game involved. For 1990, I chose a project for which I could make maximum use of the time available and for which I could best use my own abilities. I set out to find as many species as possible in Johnson County in one year.

My first step in planning was to divide potential species into four categories and then estimate the number of each that I was likely to find: (1) expect to see, most without any special effort (181 species, all of which I should see); (2) good chance to see (35 of 52 species); (3) possible, but unlikely (10 of 46 species); (4) outside possibility (2 of 15 species). My goal was set for 228 species. Next, I plotted my available time against the dates that I could look for the 98 species in categories 2 and 3. This gave me a month-by-month plan for species to look for. In order to add additional intensity to my efforts, I planned for a Big Day each month (two in May) and a week's vacation in May at the peak of migration. After the year began I added an additional goal: to drive all of the roads in the county.

January started out well. On a Big Day, alone, I found 45 species including six owls, six waterfowl, Pileated Woodpecker, Red-breasted Nuthatch, and Harris' Sparrow. During the rest of January and February, I covered about three-fourths of the roads and was rewarded by finding Northern Goshawk, Northern Shrike, and Gray Partridge. The latter species turned out to be present in all quadrants of the county. Intensive efforts to find Common Redpoll failed, but others (Tom Shires, Chuck Fuller) discovered Red and White-winged crossbills near my office in the Medical Laboratories.

March also started out with a bang when I found a Ross' Goose with Greater White-fronted Geese near the Coralville Reservoir dam. Late in the month, high water brought large concentrations of waterfowl including Tundra Swan, American Black Duck, and Greater Scaup. An early Franklin's Gull and Lesser Golden-Plover were a welcome sight, and a large flock of Smith's Longspurs returned to the same field they were in the previous two years.

After a Big Day on 31 March, I went out on the afternoon of 1 April to look for and found Loggerhead Shrike and Brewer's Blackbird, the latter a difficult bird to find in Johnson County. On 7 April, I took a long, dull walk to Sand Point and was rewarded when a Sandhill Crane flew over. On 14 April, I finally flushed a Winter Wren after many hours of searching. On 15 April, my son-in-law's two dogs helped me flush a Le Conte's Sparrow from a grassy field. I usually find the sparrow in late April, but this year I would be birding in Texas at that time. On 16 April, it was raining when I got home from work, but I went out anyway and was rewarded with my first Osprey, American White Pelican, and Cattle Egret. My sister called about a wounded Cooper's Hawk the day before I was to leave for Texas, so after checking it out, I took her to the reservoir where we found 14 American Avocets and to Lake Macbride where we found three Eared Grebes.

May is usually my big birding month, and this year was no exception. I found 192 species in the county during the month. Some of the more unusual ones were

90-22

Western Grebe, Clay-colored Sparrow, Northern Mockingbird (several locations), Ruddy Turnstone, Mississippi Kite, Alder Flycatcher, Connecticut Warbler, Prairie Warbler, and Peregrine Falcon. By the end of May, my year's list for Johnson County stood at 234 species, 6 more than my original goal. I set a new goal of 240 and reset my time priorities for the species that remained.

Summer is usually slow for new species, and I have less birding time. I added no new species in either June or July and only one in August, Little Blue Heron on the first. Water levels, which had been at flood levels in June and July, began to fall in August, leading to excellent fall habitat for shorebirds and herons.

Birding picked up in September, which turned out to be spectacular even though I took an 8-day birding trip to Newfoundland. Francis Moore and I found 104 species on 1 September, including Sanderling, which was new for the year. On the 2nd, when a passing car disturbed my shorebird watching, I noticed warblers moving in the roadside bushes. The first one in my binocular was a Black-throated Blue Warbler, only my second one for the state (another was in my yard later in the month). Encouraged by the warbler movement, I went to Oakland Cemetery to look in the conifers for Cape May Warbler. Just as I was about to leave, I found two of them when I stopped to look at a flock of Chipping Sparrows. Later that same day, Jim Fuller reported Buff-breasted Sandpiper, which I was able to find the next morning. On the 8th, I added Snowy Egret, Red-necked Phalarope, and American Bittern at the Coralville Reservoir; a Merlin was there early the next morning. On the 22nd, I finally found my first American Pipit. One afternoon Jim Fuller suggested that we look for Sharp-tailed Sparrow. I picked the spot that seemed most likely and sure enough, it was there along with my two missing sure-fire species (Virginia Rail and Sedge Wren) as a bonus. Twelve new species for September brought my total to 246. Was 250 possible?

In October I had planned to look for rare diving ducks at the end of the month, but the warm weather delayed the migration to November. The excellent water conditions at the Coralville Reservoir, however, produced the most spectacular finds of the year. After a Big Day on the 13th, which included a Western Sandpiper, I went out on the 14th to look over the Pectoral Sandpipers with the remote hope of finding a Sharp-tailed Sandpiper. Much to my surprise, I found a likely candidate and confirmed the field marks after it flew to a nearby pond. Fortunately, it was relocated late in the day and seen by many people. On the 27th, I listened to the second half of the Iowa football game while watching gulls at Babcock Access. I was about to leave when I saw a first-year gull that I thought would be my first Herring Gull of the fall, but repeated study over the next two hours convinced me that it was a first-year California Gull, a species that I had been able to study the week before in California. The bird was seen by many the next day. I was now at 250 for the year.

The first weekend in November produced one of the most spectacular fall fronts that I can remember. On Friday the 2nd, Dick Tetrault and I did a Big Day and found 10 shorebird, 10 sparrow, and 12 waterfowl species, the later heralding the first big influx of the fall. The front was stalled on Saturday with more waterfowl present. I anticipated Sunday would be better. The morning started out unexpectedly with a Red-throated Loon at the Coralville Lake dam area, and an hour later I found three White-winged Scoters at Mehaffey Bridge. The thousands of scaup were accompanied by many mergansers of all three species and all of the other common waterfowl. Even more impressive to me were 210 Common Loons in one sweep of the scope at Jolly Roger. This day also produced my luckiest bird of the year. Late in the afternoon, I was trying to relocate the Red-throated Loon for Ann Johnson and Beth

Brown, when Jim Scheib came by and told us of a Varied Thrush found by Jim Fuller at the Macbride Nature Recreation Area. After driving around and re-evaluating the directions we had, I flushed the bird off the road, but it soon flew and was not seen again. Although the rest of November had nice weather, and I searched intensively, the only other new bird for the year was Snow Bunting.

In December I continued searching for a few missing species, but was only able to add Glaucous Gull, a bird that I found at Babcock Access by watching the gull flock for several hours. That brought my year's total for Johnson County to 255 species, 27 more than I had predicted. I finished the month driving the remaining roads that I had missed.

For the year, I found all of the 181 species that I had listed as expected. More surprising was my finding 49 of 52 species that I had listed as good possibilities. These are birds that I do not encounter every year, but with intensive effort and good water conditions I was able to find almost all of them. Among the possible, but unlikely species I found 19 of 46. As predicted, I got 2 of 15 outside possibilities (Varied Thrush, Prairie Warbler), but also added four accidental species that I had not listed (Mississippi Kite, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, California Gull, and Red-throated Loon).

There were 30 species that I saw only once (or the same bird over 1 to 3 days). Eight of these were found during my many trips (sometimes two or three in one day) to Babcock Access and would have been missed without persistent coverage. Several of these single sightings occurred when I made an attempt to overcome negative thinking. "There is nothing at Sand Point and it is a long walk" (Sandhill Crane). "Sandy Beach is a long drive and it is almost supper time" (Western Grebe). "I have not seen anything at Macbride lately" (Eared Grebe). Other sightings were due to a strong hunch and previous experience: White-winged Scoter with first big influx of diving ducks, Alder Flycatcher and Connecticut Warbler in Hickory Hill Park in late May, Cape May Warbler in conifers in fall. Some, but relatively few species were found by others (both crossbills, Prairie Warbler, Varied Thrush).

I was lucky to have an excellent year for shorebird and waterfowl habitat and good waves of warblers in both spring and fall. The year was only average for winter finches and rare waterfowl. I covered several large wooded tracts in an effort to find several species known to nest in wooded areas near Johnson County (Amana Woods and Palisades-Kepler State Park), but I could not find Acadian Flycatcher, Worm-eating Warbler, and Hooded Warbler and had only single sightings of Cerulean Warbler and Louisiana Waterthrush. My biggest miss was Yellow-breasted Chat, a bird often found in Hickory Hill Park. A pair was found at William's Prairie by Jim Fuller, but when I got there they were gone.

The biggest side effect of my Big Year in Johnson County, besides having a lot of fun in a relaxed atmosphere, was creating some new lists. I reviewed all my daily field lists back to 1949 and my father's notes (F. W. Kent kept a birding diary from 1949 to 1973) in order to create my county list, my list of early and late dates for Iowa, and my newly created monthly lists for Iowa. In Johnson County in 1990, I added two species to my state list (Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, California Gull). Five of 7 new species for my Johnson County list appear to be first records for the county (Red-throated Loon, Ross' Goose, Mississippi Kite, California Gull, and Varied Thrush). I saw 44 birds in months that I had not seen them before in Iowa. Personally for the state, I had 9 new early and 19 new late spring dates; 18 new early and 30 new late fall dates; and 24 new first calendar and 44 last calendar dates. Record early or late dates for the state included 3 first, 6 second, and 1 third.

County birding can be a lot of fun. Time can be used efficiently, because distances are not great. I can get to the best birding spots in 5 to 20 minutes. This makes early morning and late evening birding feasible. One of the most satisfying aspects of a county Big Year was that I found almost all of the birds myself. Included were many species I consider rare in the county and four accidental species. Although I have birded Johnson County all of my life, I found some good spots that I was unfamiliar with or had not visited in many years.

Dick Tetrault was my most frequent companion, especially on Big Days. Jim Fuller got me out several afternoons and kept me informed of what others were finding. Carl Bendorf and Francis Moore helped me with Big Days. Ken Lowder (an audiologist) lent me his ear in the deep woods for a couple of important finds. I thank these people and others who I met in the field during the year. My wife Ann was very supportive on the home front. The combination of goal setting and ease of access to local birding spots got me into the field a lot for relaxed, enjoyable birding that produced a number of good finds.

211 Richards St., Iowa City, IA 52246

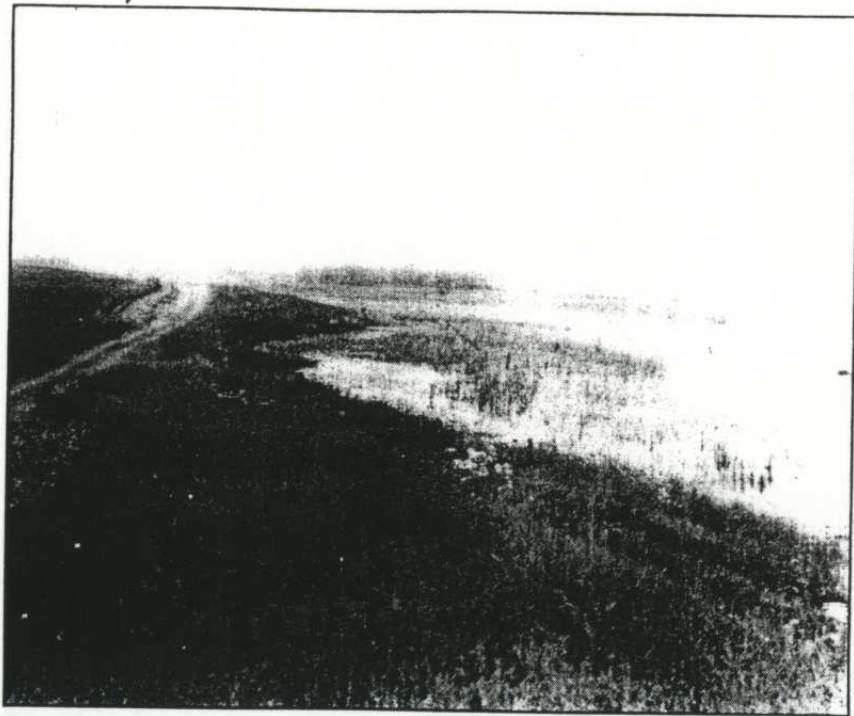


Figure 2. Road along the west side of Little Wall Lake. The road is now Highway 69 and the trees in the background are in the Hamilton County park. Photograph taken in 1916 and currently in photo collection at the Iowa Department of Transportation, Ames.

BIRDING LITTLE WALL AND ANDERSON LAKES AND TEIG'S MARSH

STEPHEN J. DINSMORE AND HANK ZALETTEL

Little Wall and Anderson lakes in Hamilton County and Teig's Marsh in Story County are typical of the prairie pothole habitat that covered central and north-central Iowa before this region was settled. These areas are not home to a great diversity of birds, although more than 230 species have been recorded here in the last 10 years. Some of the better finds include Pacific Loon, Red-necked and Western grebes, Little Blue Heron, ibis species, Oldsquaw, Black Scoter, Common Moorhen, Sandhill Crane, Pine Warbler, and Prothonotary Warbler.

Begin at the intersection of highways 69 and 175 in the center of Jewell (see Figure 1). Drive east on highway 175 for approximately 1.0 mi and turn left (north) on the first gravel road. Continue north on this road for 0.4 mi. Anderson Lake (1), formerly known as Goose Lake, is west of the road. The best viewing is from the shoulder of the road. This is a 135-acre, privately owned marsh and trespassing is not permitted.

Migration is the best time to visit this area. Summer birding is best when water levels are high. Breeding species include Pied-billed Grebe, Least Bittern, Green-backed Heron, American Coot, Marsh Wren, and Yellow-headed Blackbird. Sora, Virginia Rail, Ring-necked Duck and Common Moorhen nest here some years. For a better view of the south end of the marsh, return to the railroad tracks located immediately north of Highway 175 (2). You can park along the shoulder of the road and follow the tracks west for approximately 0.2 mi. This is the best place to see migrating waterfowl and herons. American White Pelican and Virginia Rail are seen here occasionally. When water levels are low (usually every 2-3 years), a wide variety of shorebirds may be seen here, including Black-bellied Plover, Hudsonian Godwit, and Wilson's Phalarope. Bell's Vireo may breed in the scrubby areas along the railroad tracks. Winter birding is often very slow, although Short-eared Owl may occasionally

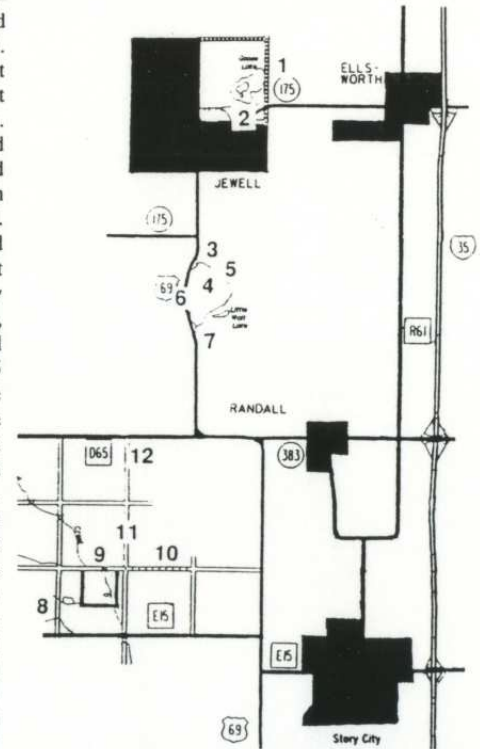


Figure 1. Map of the Little Wall and Anderson lake area. Numbers refer to areas discussed in text.

DOCUMENTATION OF EXTRAORDINARY BIRD SIGHTING

Red-throated Loon, 4 November 1990, Coralville Reservoir, Johnson County, Iowa

Observer: Thomas H. Kent, 211 Richards St., Iowa City, IA 52246

Other observers: with me shortly after I found bird--Ken Lowder, Jim Fuller, Jim Scheib; others later.

Time: 7:45-8:30 a.m. and 12:20-12:45 p.m.

Habitat: deep part of reservoir at West Overlook (just above dam) and at Mehaffy Bridge.

Description:

8:15 at the West Overlook: At 7:45 I spotted a small loon off the boat ramp area to the north and west. It has a distinctly upturned bill and holds the bill pointed above the horizontal at all times. I saw it next to a Common Loon and it was considerably smaller, although the two were some distance apart. The small loon has an all-dark front, head, and back. The only light areas are the lower neck and breast. When it lifted out of the water, the underparts were dull white. There are some white flecks along the lower edge of the wing. The back and head all appear dark. There seems to be a little lightness in the eye and perhaps a light streak through the eye. The upper mandible is straight, the lower mandible curves upward. The bill is quite thin and pointed. The bird has no crest or gular pouch to suggest a cormorant.

Now the bird is swimming next to a Common Loon. It is about two-thirds the length. The head is much smaller and slimmer. The bill is about two-thirds the length of the Common Loon's bill--very thin compared to the Common Loon, which has a bill about twice as thick. The Common Loons have white on the face and neck; this bird has white only on the front of the lower neck. The body is much less bulky and the bird rides lower in the water than the Common Loons.

8:25: Just observed the small loon with four Common Loons. It was side by side with a Common Loon. The overall small size is quite apparent. The head is much smaller, rather flat and narrow, about half the size of a Common Loon's head. Still can't see any detail in the dark areas.

12:42: I've been watching the Red-throated Loon at Mehaffy Bridge for about twenty minutes. It came within 100 yards and I was able to see it better than this morning. The head, back of neck, and back are uniform dark black-gray-brown, very soft appearing. The wings have a little bit of marking on the feathers, but very inconspicuous. The head shape, bill, eye, and slight mark through the eye are the same as seen this morning. The white of the breast comes up on the neck as an inverted, rounded V when seen head-on and seemed more demarcated than this morning.

In my notes I forgot to mention that the bill was dark. The bird flapped its wings once and I saw the rather narrow, pointed wings. The eye color was probably dark red or orange. I never saw the bird fly. I never could detect that the throat was darker or see any lines on the neck.

Behavior: Swimming, occasionally diving in a.m.; diving continuously and under water most of the time in the p.m.

Conditions: Dull overcast with light rain. Seen at 100-300 yards (estimate). Used 20x scope and 50x Questar.

Similar species: The head posture resembled a cormorant, but the bill, overall coloration, and behavior quickly excluded that possibility. The size and bill led me to an immediate identification. I was puzzled about the plumage. I expected to see a juvenile or basic-plumaged bird, but the distribution of dark coloration was that of alternate plumage. I assume that the red/black throat, lines of neck, and gray tones had faded to give one rather uniform color. The drab light may have contributed some to the failure to see color differences, but the last observation was relatively close and the texture of the feathers could be seen.

Agreement: All that I talked to agreed.

Previous experience: Have seen one in alternate plumage in Iowa, several in Alaska, and basic plumaged birds on the West Coast.

References/time used: NGS Guide during observation. Other guides next day. I have not yet researched fall molt.

Time of notes: dictated as italicized during observation; typed: next day.

What species? RED-THROATED LOON How many? 1

90-22

Location? CORALVILLE RESERVOIR - WEST OVERLOOK

Type of habitat? LAKE

When? date(s): 4 NOVEMBER, 1990 time: 8:25 to 8:50 AM

Who? your name and address: JIM FULLER, 6 LONGVIEW KNOLL, IOWA CITY

others with you: TOM KENT, JIM SCHEIB, KEN LOWDER

others before or after you: MOB AFTER

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

THE GENERAL SHAPE OF THE BIRD WAS COMPARED TO FOUR COMMON LOONS WHICH WERE AT TIMES CLOSE ENOUGH FOR GOOD COMPARISON. IT WAS ONLY 2/3 TO 3/4 THE SIZE OF COMMON LOON, AND HAD A MUCH THINNER NECK, SHORTER NECK, AND SMALLER HEAD. THE BILL WAS RELATIVELY MUCH THINNER. THE RED-THROATED LOON ALSO SEEMED GENERALLY LIGHTER THAN THE COMMON LOONS. THE THROAT, SIDE OF NECK AND UPPER BREAST WERE WHITE, AND THE WHITE ON THE SIDE OF FACE APPEARED TO SURROUND THE EYE. (ABOVE IT). THE GRAY OF THE CROWN, NAPE, AND BACK OF NECK APPEARED LIGHTER THAN THE BACK COLOR. THERE WAS LIGHT SPECKLING ON THE BACK. THE TOP OF HEAD WAS OUTLINED MORE LIKE THE COMMON LOONS THERE APPEARED TO BE A STEEP FOREHEAD, RATHER FLAT TOP OF THE HEAD — THE HEAD WAS MORE BLOCKY THAN ROUND. AT TIMES THE THIN BILL WAS TIPPED IN THE AIR, RATHER THAN HELD HORIZONTAL LIKE THE COMMON LOONS. THE TRANSITION FROM DARK TO LIGHT ON THE HEAD AND NECK WAS NOT SHARP.

Similar species and how eliminated: COMMON LOON COMPARED ABOVE. PACIFIC LOON HAS A DARKER BACK, THICKER NECK, BILL HEAD HORIZONTAL; SHARP DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DARK AND LIGHT ON HEAD AND NECK; NO WHITE ABOVE EYE, AND QUITE OFTEN A "CHINSTRIP"

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? NO

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment: MORNING - CLOUDY - LOOKING TO NORTHWEST WITH KOWA TSN-4 TELESCOPE (20-60x) - ESTIMATED 400-500 YARDS.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: SEEN AT CEDAR LAKE - CEDAR RAPIDS SEVERAL YEARS AGO. ALSO ON THE WEST COAST.

References and persons consulted before writing description: NATL. GEOG.

How long before field notes made? 2 HOURS this form completed? 12 HOURS

MAIL TO: T. H. Kent, Field Reports Editor, 211 Richards Street, Iowa City IA 52240

DOCUMENTATION FORM
Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

Species: Red-throated Loon

Location: Mehaffey Bridge Area, Coralville Reservoir, Johnson Co., IA

Habitat: Open water

Date: November 4, 1990

Time: 4:35 pm to 4:55 pm

Name and Address: Ann Johnson, 532 120th Avenue, Norwalk, Iowa 50211

Other observers: Beth Brown, Osceola

Description of bird: The bird was identified as a loon by its presence in deep water, the general shape and size, and the generally dark body and head with lighter throat and breast. The bird was one of six loons on this part of the lake and initially did not show a distinct size differential. The most notable distinction was the profile of a loon with a smaller bill and swimming with its head tilted back, somewhat like a cormorant. As we watched for a time, the bird got closer to and mingled with the Common Loons in the area. At this point I realized that the Red-throated had been considerably closer to us and had distorted my size perception. As it swam with the Commons, it was obviously smaller and had a thinner neck, giving it somewhat of a "grebe" look. As all of the birds faced away from us, this one looked much slimmer with a narrower body, neck, and head. On profile the bill was much smaller and thinner and the head was flatter than the Commons. Light conditions made it difficult to ascertain color as the body and head just looked drab gray. I really couldn't determine if it was a lighter gray than the larger loons. The most obvious difference was in the color differential between the body/head and throat/breast. While on the Commons there was a stark contrast of dark gray to white, the Red-throated showed more of a dingy gray front and consequently less contrast to the upper parts. This could also be a possible indication of lighter upper parts.

Similar species and how eliminated: Although the profile was somewhat similar, cormorants could be eliminated by lack of facial skin and pointed as opposed to hooked bill. Western Grebe would have had a longer neck, flatter head, and straighter bill. Common Loon was eliminated on direct comparison by smaller size, upturned head and bill, flatter head, and less contrast between upper and lower parts. Yellow-billed Loon would have been at least the same size as the Commons and show more contrast between upper and lower parts. Pacific Loon was eliminated based on a lack of distinct contrast between the back and head and the lighter throat, neck and breast. The posture and uptilt of the bill also helped eliminate the Pacific Loon.

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? No
If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions (lighting, distance, optics): Observed through scope at 25x - 35x in very overcast conditions with light rain. Distance was an estimated 400- 500 yards. Lighting was not optimal but adequate.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: New Iowa bird but much experience with Common Loons in various plumages.

References and persons consulted before writing description: Audubon Master Guide, Peterson's Field Guide to the Birds, NGS Field Guide to the Birds of North America, and Kaufmann's Advanced Birding were consulted prior to actual observation of the bird.

How long before field notes made? A few notes made at observation How long before this form completed? Same evening upon return home

What species? Red-throated Loon How many? 1 (2?)Location? Coralville Reservoir, West overlook near damType of habitat? Open water, reservoirWhen? date(s): 11/4/90 time: _____ to _____Who? your name and address: Carol Thompson 1116 Muscatine Iowa City 522others with you: Bud Gode, Cal & Bernice Knightothers before or after you: Tom Hunt

Describe the bird(s) including only what you observed. Include size, shape, details of all parts (bill, eye, head, neck, back, wing, tail, throat, breast, belly, under tail, legs, feet). Also mention voice and behavior.

Solitary loon (there were several common loons nearby for comparison), head and bill had upward tilt, bill much thinner than common loon and had slight upward curve. The forehead, crown and nape were gray, the throat was darker than nape, appeared black. The area around eye was lighter extending to bill as it beginning molt to winter plumage.



Bird was originally at some distance although features were clear. The bird made several calls, definitely not common loon calls.

It then took off and made two loops eventually flying to the south. Some people left at this →

Similar species and how eliminated:

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? No

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: give lighting, distance (how measured), and optical equipment:
Overcast gray, 20-45x zoom scope

Previous experience with species and similar ones: •

References and persons consulted before writing description: MEMORANDUM NO. 5 guideHow long before field notes made? None this form completed? 4 days

90-22

point. While scanning for other birds, I noticed the same (another bird) swimming from the east. The bird could have circled back and landed. I could not tell if it was same or different bird. At this point, it swam west, past our observation point, much closer than before. The gray color was clearly visible as were the other field marks.