

DOCUMENTATION FORM
Extraordinary Bird Sightings in Iowa

Species: Red-throated Loon

Location: Lake Manawa State Park, Pottawattamie County, Iowa

Habitat: Open water

Date: November 12, 1990

Time: approx. 11:50 am to 12:15 pm

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

Other observers: Tim Schantz, Knoxville

Description of bird: We originally saw a loon-type bird (dark upperparts, lighter lowerparts, thick head and neck) far out on the lake and we both felt it was for some reason worth a better look. When it was finally relocated, it had moved considerably closer to us. The first characteristic to jump out at me was its pearly gray head which was much lighter than the dark gray to black back. The back showed a lot of white speckling on it. As the bird turned the bill was very distinctive in that it was small, thin and straight along the upper mandible, but the distal half or so of the lower mandible made an abrupt upward angle of approximately 30 degrees, giving a definite upturned look. The cheek, throat, underparts of the neck and breast were lighter but it was more of a dirty white or gray wash than appears on either Common or Pacific Loon. The division between light and dark feathering on the head and neck was more diffuse than other loons. The top of the head seemed a bit darker than the nape and the dark eye really stood out and looked almost like it was encircled in white with the darker cap dropping down in front of the eye. The neck was thin for a loon but not as thin as a grebe. The head was relatively flat and on profile the bird was remarkable when it had its head tipped up, accentuating the upward tilt of the lower mandible. When it dove, it just laid its head in the water and disappeared with hardly a ripple, resurfacing sometimes 100 - 200 feet away.

Similar species and how eliminated:

Cormorants could be eliminated by bill shape, among other characteristics. The bird had some similarities to a Western Grebe, but the grebe would hold its head parallel to the water, has a longer neck, and does not show the contrast between head/nape and back. Common Loon was eliminated by posture, size and shape of bill, contrast of lighter head and darker back, and more diffuse separation of upper and underparts. Pacific Loon was eliminated by the grayer underparts, diffuse separation of upper and underparts, posture, and sharp upward angle on lower mandible.

Did anyone disagree or have reservations about identification? No

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions (lighting, distance, optics): Sky was clear and the sun was shining to our left rear. For much of the time observation was at distances of 70-100 yards through scope at 20x-40x. Tim attempted to get some photos, but at best will have some profile shots.

Previous experience with species and similar ones: Limited experience with this particular species, but observation of a Red-throated Loon only one week earlier was very helpful in quickly identifying this particular bird.

References and persons consulted before writing description: NGS Field Guide to the Birds of North America was consulted during observation.

How long before field notes made? notes dictated during observation How long before this form completed? Following day

Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*)

Lake Manawa, Pottawattamie County

November 13, 1990; 2:00 p.m. - 2:11 p.m., 2:15-2:16

Before me: Ann Johnson, Babs Padelford, BJ Rose, Ross Silcock

With me: No one

Description:

Generally a smallish, slender loon, dark above and white below.

"Dark brown back which contrasts with pale gray crown and nape", Back dark but cannot see any markings. "white underparts", "white underwings except for wide dark trailing edge" Front of neck immediately under chin smudgy gray to off-white. Bill is "slender, steel gray, perhaps the "upper mandible darker" Bill appears more slender than Common Loon but this is subjective as no Common Loon in area. "No chin strap". " Neck slender, with" no sharp demarcation" between front and sides of neck. No trace of red throat color, completely white. " Upperwings "long, slender, completely dark" "Breast and belly snow white" "Definitely white in cheek area."

Behavior

When I first arrived the bird was very actively preening, raising wings. It later skimmed along the water for about 75 feet but did not fly. At one point it did a complete "barrel roll" in water. Very active. Dove and reappeared much closer at which time I saw the very white cheek area but the bird again dove (Ring-billed Gulls had come into the area) and did not reappear during my stay. During the first few minutes the bird was so actively preening that the characteristic up-tilted bill posture was not evident. Later when it was swimming, it did hold the bill at an angle about 70% of the time. (This is an overrated characteristic in my opinion).

Similar species: Eliminated from Common Loon by small size, slender bill, clear white cheek area. Eliminated from Pacific Loon by lack of chin strap, no sharp demarcation between front and back of neck, nape and crown definitely paler than back.

Light conditions: Sun at first over left shoulder; later almost directly behind me. Light conditions were good but rather strong heat waves prevented me from getting a really definitive look.

Distance: 750 feet, maybe more!!

Notes recorded during sighting (in quotes). This report written 5 hours later.

Equipment: 9 x binoculars, 25 x scope

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