

DOCUMENTATION FORM

Species Red-throated Loon **How many?** two

Location? Saylorville Reservoir, off of west end of dam

Type of habitat? freshwater lake

When? date(s): 7 November 1999 **Time:** 7:45-8:45 a.m.

Who? Jim Dinsmore

Others with you no one

Others before or after you Bery Engebretsen and Dennis

Thompson saw one there on 6 November

Describe the bird(s)

Two small loons. Compared in size directly with Ring-billed Gull (somewhat larger but not huge compared to gull) and Common Merganser (ditto)

Back, mantle, etc on both birds a dark brown; one bird, in good light, showed a slight bit of light markings on tips of feathers but not obvious.

Back of neck and top of head more a grayish brown; in good light could be seen to clearly contrast in color with the color of the back. Front of the neck was washed in a brown; not a solid patch and without any really distinct markings on it. Although the front of the neck differed in color from the back, there was no distinct line separating the two color patches; just a gradual change from the brown of the front to the brown-gray of the back. Chin region white with some white behind and below the eye (basically on the check region). Did not notice if there was white above or in front of the eye (a mistake I didn't realize until later). Bill seemed thinner than those of the Common Loons that were scattered across the lake. Also the bill was bicolored, dark on upper mandible and light below while bills of Common Loons all seemed to be light colored. My impression was that at least at times, the bill seemed upturned, in part because the birds often cocked their heads up a bit, somewhat like cormorants although perhaps not as distinctly as the latter.

Similar species and how eliminated:

I spent a long time puzzling over these birds, both in the field and later when I had several references to consult. None of the guides I looked at showed a bird that looked like these.

Common Loon (a small one): removed on the basis of size (birds too small for Common Loon), the thinner and bicolored bill, and the color pattern on the neck. At this time of year, all of the Common Loons I have seen (and saw on Saylorville that day) were distinctly white on

the front of the neck with some partial bands of brown extending back in to the white.

Pacific Loon: Eliminated on behavior (head posture), lack of a distinct dark/white line along the side of the neck, lack of chin straps across neck, and presence of brown on front of neck. Also the gray/brown contrast between neck and back would point away from Pacific but not eliminate it.

Red-throated Loon: This is what I first thought the birds were but as I viewed them, I convinced myself several times that they were Pacific Loons. However, the combination of characters listed above seem to eliminate the other two possible species and also are positive characters for the Red-throated Loon. One character that puzzled me was the size of the bill. At least some of the guides (Advanced Birding esp) show the Red-throated Loon as having a tiny bill, much smaller than on this bird but those illustrations do not match those in other guides which emphasize more the shape of the bill than the size.

Did any one disagree or have reservations about identification? see above but I finally was convinced

If yes, explain:

Viewing conditions: Great for a loon. The birds were below me and at times less than 5 feet from the shoreline. I often had both birds together in view in the scope. The light was great (soft morning light from the right) and the birds were perhaps 100 yards away. Couldn't ask for better viewing conditions for a loon and they stayed there for at least 20-30 minutes.

Previous experience Have seen Red-throated Loons in Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Alaska, but always at a distance and never under such good conditions.

References & persons consulted before writing description: Consulted both Robbins and Natl. Geographic guides in field, used Advanced Birding after I returned from field. Also discussed the birds at length with Steve Dinsmore, going through the field characteristics I had seen.

One of the toughest ids I have worked on in quite a while.

How long before field notes made? Notes taken in field while viewing bird; this form filled out next morning from those notes.