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COLORADO RARE BIRD REPORT

RED-THROATED LOON

Gavia stellataLocation: Lake Holbrook; Rocky Ford; Otero County, ColoradoDate: November 24, 1996Background:

I was birding with Brandon Percival. We visited Lake Holbrook, which was partly frozen, and it did not appear to have many birds. We pulled the car up to the dike road along the northeast corner and I first observed the loon at about 200 yards. At that time it swam leisurely, not diving, within good scope distance. It gradually swam quietly away from us, usually directly away, but occasionally turning to look behind, or turn to the side. The sun was excellent, emerging from light high clouds that were burning off. The sun was behind us as we faced the bird. I watched it in my Kowa scope (20-60X). The Red-throated Loon mainly swam on the surface and only rarely dove under the water to feed. Observation was from about 10:25 a.m. until 10:40 a.m. at which point it had moved off to about 1/4 mile and it was clear that the best period for observation was over.

I was surprised and delighted to hear the bird call at close range 7 times. It did this by lowering the head to the water and opening the bill. The call was a single note, more gull-like or even somewhat honking and goose-like, than it was similar to a Common or Pacific Loon.

Description:

The bird was a medium-large waterfowl. It was well less than two feet long, we guessed perhaps 20-22" long or so. It was much smaller than nearby Double-crested Cormorants. Although there was no Common Loon present for comparison, it seemed smaller and more slender than would Common Loon. The bird was a juvenile. It was dark grayish above, but whitish along the waterline and on the breast, throat and chin. It had a proportionately small, round head with a evenly sloping forehead that sloped gradually into the top of the bill, without forming much of an angle. The back and upper-parts were an even dull gray, only slightly darker than the light gray head, neck and face. The back had innumerable rows of fine white dots. The chin, throat and lower edges of the face were white, which graded gently into the gray of the upper face and lower neck. There was no dark border to the gray foreneck, but instead the gray sides to the neck blended gradually into the white neck. The dark eye was entirely within the gray lower edge of the face. The bill was thin, chisel-like and distinctly upturned. The culmen was straight and the lower mandible was upturned. The bird held the bill up at about a 10 degree angle.

Similar Species:

The Pacific Loon is most similar because of its similarly small size and slender bill. However it has a straight, horizontally-held bill and a distinct blackish border between the dark rear-neck and light fore-neck. The Common Loon is darker, much larger and with a larger, blockier head and steep forehead. There is an uneven border at the sides of the neck. The bill is heavier, with a curved culmen, and the bill is held horizontally. The Yellow-billed Loon is much bigger, with a large, pale, up-turned bill. It has a darker, not lighter, area behind the eye and shows rows of spots on the back.

Experience with Species:

I have seen many Common and Pacific Loons in Colorado and on the West coast. I have seen Red-throated Loons three before in Colorado (1991; 1992; 1994) and in March 1992 in the Seattle, Washington area. I have seen Yellow-billed Loons several times in Colorado.

This report was prepared from notes made at the time of observation.

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