Loons

Rich Stallcup

The migration of birds has always boggled the minds of humans. Much migration takes place at night and can normally be detected only by the appearance and disappearance of large numbers of birds or by hearing small voices in a dark sky. To be able to see and feel this great and mystical phenomenon is a very special experience.

Many species of large birds move during the day, perhaps the most notable being wild geese, and Earth’s poetry is strongly laced with visions of them. Loons, too, are abundant diurnal migrants along the California coast and their pageant of motion goes on, one direction or the other, throughout most of the year.

Like cormorants, loons here are a small genus of similar species and are all too often unidentified by birders. Reasons range from apathy (if you’ve “got” them all, you don’t need any) to confusion and frustration concerning methods of telling them apart. Not much can be done about the former problem but here we hope to clear up the latter.

Most individual loons may easily be identified to species even as they fly by several hundred meters seaward. Again, as with cormorants, the primary keys are in shape rather than markings.

General—There are four species, all of which are very distinctive in alternate (breeding) plumage when paired on the water or flying nearby. The identification problems are most glaring for basic (winter) plumage Common vs. Yellow-billed, Common vs. Arctic, and distant flying birds in any plumage. The wispy and pale gray Red-throated Loon on the water in basic plumage should not be difficult, except perhaps for confusion with the Arctic Loon juvenile in basic plumage.

Similar birds—Few kinds of birds can be confused with loons. At a great distance, flying Arcticics may resemble murres or even Black-vented Shearwaters but this is a matter of carelessness. The non-loon most often called a loon is Double-crested Cormorant in juvenile plumage with whitish underparts and dark upperparts. From a distance, see that the swimming cormorant carries its head high with the bill pointed slightly upward (like Red-throated but unlike other loons) and that its dive is preceded by a noticeable kick and thrust.

Loons just slide under the water, especially the big ones.

Occurrence—All species except Yellow-billed are common along the Pacific Coast during migration and in winter, Arctic being the most numerous. Arcticics prefer to be pelagic (not often entering closed bays) and may be seen almost any time (except mid-June through mid-August) flying at sea. Red-throateds also migrate slightly seaward but do their foraging nearshore either in calm bays and river mouths or in the surf there. In migration, the larger two species tend to fly considerably higher than the smaller two.

Flying shape—The two big loons, the Common and the very rare Yellow-billed, may be separated from the two smaller ones by three main points. They are very heavy and have a relatively slow, rowing wingbeat; their huge feet look like a black tennis ball following their short tails; and they are very large in the front end with thick necks, huge, blocky heads and immense, straight bills (though against a pallid sky Yellow-billed Loons look bill-less). Along the California coast a bird demonstrating the above characters would be called a Common Loon by default.

Conversely, the two smaller loons, Arctic and Red-throated, have more twilly, quicker wingbeats, smaller, often unnoticeable feet (though on some Arcticics the feet are definitely apparent) and relatively thin necks with small heads and detectably narrow bills. These smaller species may be told apart by their relative darkness (see below) and by the shape of the head. In Arctic Loons the forecrown is quite rounded, beginning with a steep angle upward from the base of the bill. The bill itself is dark and straight with a subtle decurrature to the culmen (the top ridge of the bill). All of these factors lend a drooped look to the entire front end and a more hump-backed look at the haunches (like Common Loon). Red-throated Loon has a very sloped forecrown with a low angle back from the base of the culmen and the hindcrown is strongly domed. The bill itself is usually light in color and gives a definite upturned impression. Thus, the whole head and bill appear up-tipped. The business of wing elevation of Arctic and Red-throated loons (Birds of North America by Robbins et al., p. 19) does not seem to be valid, at least not for birds in the eastern Pacific.

Flying marks—From shore, the birds are usually too far away to see much plumage detail. When they are close enough, however, alternate plumage birds may be identified by using the field guides. Distinct Redthroateds in any plumage may be told from the others when flying at or above eye level by the presence of a gray bar on the bird’s side at the base of the underwing. It connects to the gray back and rump and on the wing and is much less obvious than the black bar shown by the other spe-
cies. Alternate plumage Arctics have very easily seen frosty gray hindcrows and show a bold, white “racing stripe” on each side of the body at the base of the wing (scapular feathers). These pale markings are very noticeable against the blackish ground color. Commons and Yellow-billed are told by their shapes and large, black-looking heads. Basic plumage birds at a distance are best told by shape, though adult Arctics still often show a gray nape which contrasts with the otherwise blackish upperparts. Red-throateds are noticeably gray on all the upperparts with darker flight feathers producing a dark trailing edge to the wing. Flying basic Arctic Loon’s head looks quite dark, while Red-throated’s looks quite light.

Parked shape—The two big species are similar in shape, having huge, rectangular heads (usually with a distinct rounded bump on the forecrown and a more arched hindcrown) and very large bills. They are thick-necked and appear even more so since the head is held sunken down. The bill is usually held parallel to the water and in these species it is often shaken from side to side (sometimes an Arctic will do this too). Arctics and Red-throateds usually swim with their necks more erect than the larger two species. Head and bill shape are the same as under “Flying Shape,” but are even more exaggerated here. Arctics have rounded forecrows and sloped hindcrows, while Red-throateds have sloped forecrows and domed hindcrows. These heads, combined with unique bill shapes and comparatively small bodies, should identify the birds even in silhouette.

Parked marks—With a good view, alternate plumage birds are easy to identify. Remember, however, that the red on Red-throated’s throat looks black in less than perfect light and that some Arctics, especially individuals of the race Gavia arctica viridigularis of the western Pacific, have less gray napes and green, not purple iridescence on the throat. Yellow-billed Loon heads are iridescent velvety purple, not green like Common Loon. Basic plumage is more difficult. There are numerous features which differ on the average between Common and Yellow-billed loons (see Binford, et al.), but only the coloration of the culmen is singularly diagnostic. In Yellow-billed Loons, the entire culmen is dark gray or black. Other features to consider, in descending order of usefulness, are: a postocular spot (a small circle of darkness which juts towards the eye from the nape into the white face) in Yellow-billed Loons, usually lacking in Commons; a glazed brown color to the head and neck of Yellow-billed which is usually gray to dark chocolate or blackish in Commons; and an upturned (smiley) look to a Yellow-billed’s bill, seldom obvious in Commons.

In telling basic Commons from Arctics, shape is the best clue. Other helpful features are subtle and lie in the area of face and neck. While Arctics have a sharp definition between dark upperparts and white underparts, Commons have less, and often have a fuzzy, grayish zone between the two. While most Arctics have the eye almost entirely concealed in the dark part of the face, the eye of most Commons is narrowly surrounded by white, most prominently in front. Adult basic Arctics have a “chinstrap” of dark that comes from the hindcrown toward the base of the throat; Commons lack this feature. Most Commons have a small peninsula of white which invades the dark area midneck in the position of the white necklace of their alternate plumage; Arctics lack this feature. A large white spot on the side, near the rear of Arctic Loons just above the waterline, has been said to be a good field mark. In our area, this is not a good mark, and as many Commons as Arctics have it. Many Arctics lack it. While loons are feeding, they ride low in the water, but while resting ride much.
mistake. During these months since Bill’s death I have been learning to accept life’s changes and feeling very in tune with the pulsing rhythm of the universe. Having experienced death through Bill, I have gained a stronger appreciation for each moment I am alive. He touched my life as he touched so many others, sharing an enthusiasm for the natural world that has enriched all of our lives. I’ve received such beautiful letters from friends recalling treasured moments in the field with Bill. My days are filled with recollection and the twinkle of Bill’s spirit is alive and well within my own spirit. This spring as the warblers sing in the forest near our home and the eagles soar above the ridge and the owls call in the night, I can know that Bill’s spirit will never die.

Do not stand at my grave and weep—
I am not there. I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am the diamond glint on snow.
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you wake in the morning hush,
I am the swiftest bird in circling flight.
I am the soft star light at night.
Do not stand at my grave and weep.
I am not there. I do not sleep.

—from an Indian Death Song

Please know that Tule, Cedar, and I are well and growing alongside the trees in our orchard. Thank you for the loving support you have all given us, and for being our friends.

Bob Stewart

When I think of Billy, it is his intensity and alertness to his immediate environment that first come to mind.

On a back-packing trip in Chiapas, Mexico through jungle and coffee plantations, I birded, camped, and played with him. We spent the night of his birthday in a school house in a village where gringos were rare. The Chole Indians watched us go through our bird books and listened as Bill played great blues tunes on one or another of his seven harmonicas. We had played baseball with the Indians a few hours before and when we went down to the river to swim, it seemed as if the whole village went down to watch us. The next night we stayed in another village school after playing full-court basketball with the Indians. After the game we noticed some were practicing, and realized that we had introduced the jump shot, behind-the-back pass, and the running lay-up. The next night we slept in the real jungle. One of our hammocks was tied to the same little sapling. Bill, worrying about getting malaria (I had taken pills), slapped at mosquitoes in his sleep all night as I bunched in unison. The next morning the usually-coordinated Bill kept falling over backward with his backpack because he had started the day in bare feet and sandals and couldn’t get any traction in the slick trail mud. Finally I took his pack and he managed to stay upright carrying his lighter knapsack.

We didn’t miss a bird on that journey, but now, looking back, it was just being with Billy that was most important. All of us who shared even a little part of his life will really miss that.

Rich Stallcup

It is a great rarity in life to make connection with a person so naturally charismatic that happiness and warmth are always generated by his simple presence. Those of us who were gifted by such connection with Billy Clow have forever had our lives altered strongly towards goodness because of his gentle influence. His enthusiasm and knowledge for and about nature, especially the feathered nation, were so contagious that even passersby could not help but absorb some of it. His natural leadership and keen ability to know the right ways were witnessed by hundreds of people on natural excursions in the U.S. and in the American tropics. Those hundreds automatically pass the love to thousands more. If there were just lots more like him . . .

A friend and colleague has gone ahead. As the rest of us will follow we may be sure that the other side will be safe and carefully scouted. Once again we may confidently follow in the tracks of Billy.

Tule, Cedar, and Lynn, we love you.

Loons

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higher. This relative buoyancy dictates the amount of white which can be seen. Red-throated is the easiest to identify because of its upturned head and bill, its bluntness and grayness, and it is the only one with the eye usually entirely in the white part of the face. Especially in adults, nearly the whole neck is white with only a stripe of gray down the dorsal ridge. Immatures appear dark but never as dark as any other loon. Additionally, Red-throated is the only one in basic plumage to have small white spots (or "stars," thus the specific name, stellata) on its back and scapular feathers. If the others have markings at all on the back, they are scalloped. Juvenile Arctics are the loons most similar to basic are the loons most similar to basic Red-throateds of any age because of the Arctics' gray heads and necks, the pale edges to their dark back feathers, and the lack of chinstraps. If the white spots are more like big white bars than narrow scallops, the bird is probably an adult which is molting its unmarked black back into fancy alternate plumage long before the other basic plumage features change.

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Bibliography


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