

A PROBABLE ARCTIC LOON SIGHTING IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

Russell Tkachuk
Box 132
Roberts Creek, B.C.
V0N 2W0

Abstract -- I describe a bird identified as an Arctic Loon (*Gavia arctica*) at Roberts Creek, British Columbia on 18 and 23 March 2001 and review other reported extralimital occurrences in North America.

Key words: Arctic Loon, British Columbia, extralimital occurrence, *Gavia arctica*, Roberts Creek.

On 18 March 2001 at approximately 13:00, the author was examining about a dozen Pacific Loons (*Gavia pacifica*) with an 82 mm. Kowa TSN-824 birding telescope fitted with a 20-60x eyepiece. The birds were very close (approximately 100 m.) to the beach at Roberts Creek, B.C. (49° 25.319' North 123° 38.953' West). Normally in this area, Pacific Loons are farther from shore at approximately 500-1000 m. or even farther out in Georgia Strait. The close presence of the birds and the excellent viewing conditions during a bright hazy day with no wind provided an ideal opportunity to study these beautiful birds. While scanning the birds, I noticed a loon that was preening itself and loafing lazily a short distance from the main raft of Pacific Loons.

I noted almost immediately that something was different about this bird in comparison with the nearby Pacific Loons. It was larger than the Pacific Loons by approximately 5-7 cm. (size compared several times in the same scope views.) It did not have a chinstrap or a vent line (while preening, it exposed its ventral rear area several times). It had a chunky-shaped head with a rather flat-topped crown. The beak was held up at a slight angle to the horizontal. Both the head and the beak of this bird were larger than those of the nearby Pacific Loons but smaller than those of a Common Loon (*Gavia immer*). (Common Loons occur daily in this area and Pacific Loons are seen commonly here also except during July and August.) The neck was thicker than those of the Pacific Loons and the nape was grey. The neck did not have a collar or partial collar. The bird had whitish cheeks with a fuzzy eyeline. The loon had a prominent white flare area above the water line that was emphasized in the flank area. These features collectively indicate that the bird was an Arctic Loon (*G. arctica*).

As Arctic Loon is not listed on any current B.C. bird checklist, I excitedly called my wife, Jean, out on to the balcony to confirm my sightings and then phoned fellow birders Tony Greenfield and Rand Rudland. I made a quick sketch of the bird (Figure 1) and jotted down some observation notes.

After Rand Rudland arrived, we re-examined the Arctic Loon in direct comparison to the nearby Pacific Loons, discussed our observations and in general confirmed my initial impressions as stated above and shown in the sketch (Figure 1). In approximately 20 minutes, the bird slowly drifted further away to the northwest and was out of sight by the time that Tony Greenfield arrived. We rushed out along

the beach farther to the northwest and searched for the loon, but we were not able to find it.

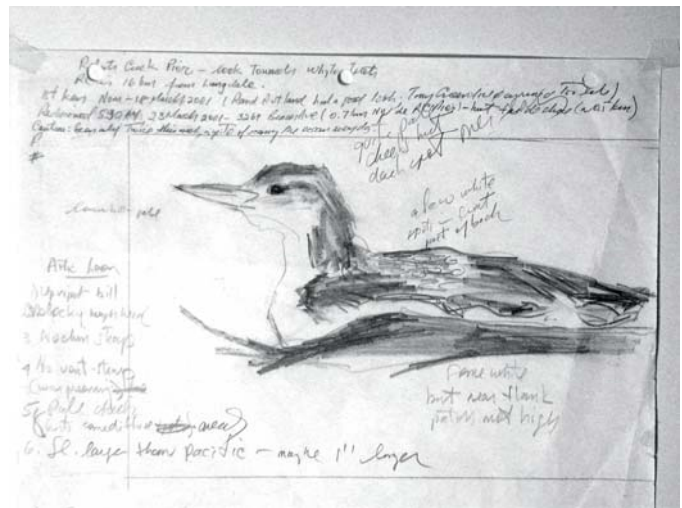


Figure 1: A sketch by Russ Tkachuk of the Arctic Loon observed at Roberts Creek.

Five days later, at the same location in Roberts Creek, on 23 March 2001, at 17:30-17:45, the author saw again what appeared to be the same Arctic Loon. The approaching darkness prevented anybody else from viewing the bird. The loon was not seen again in spite of daily searches during the ensuing weeks.

All of the above observations agree closely with descriptions of Arctic Loons published by Walsh (1988), Roberson (1989), Schulenberg (1989), McCaskie *et al.* (1990), Dunn and Rose (1992), Birch and Lee (1997) and Russell (2002). The larger size of the present bird in direct comparison with nearby Pacifics by 5-7 cm. corresponds closely with the estimates of 65 cm. for *Gavia pacifica* and 72 cm. for *G. arctica viridigularis* by the Wild Bird Society of Japan (1985:26) and 24 in. and 27 in. respectively by Meyer de Schauensee (*vide* Birch and Lee 1997) and the other measurements mentioned by Walsh (1988) and Russell (2002). While several authors have pointed out that size criteria have to be used judiciously to distinguish between the two species, as there is a size overlap between them (Schulenberg 1989; McCaskie *et al.* 1990; Russell 2002), Dunn and Rose (1992) specifically mention that Arctics at Gambell, Alaska appear larger.

The present Arctic Loon was in Basic I plumage, corresponding closely to the photographs taken in Bodega Bay, California in May 1995 of birds in Basic I plumage (Birch and Lee 1997). In this plumage, juvenal feathers may be retained to give a bird a scaled upper body appearance, combined with a dusky cheek appearance with an eye streak (Birch and Lee 1997:Figures 12 and 13). Confusingly, these authors also show a drawn image of a juvenal first winter Arctic Loon (*ibid*:106) that has white cheeks with a strongly contrasting black upper head.

The presence of white flanks in Arctic Loons is usually considered to be the most important feature in distinguishing them from Pacific Loons (Harrison 1995:209; Walsh 1988; McCaskie *et al.* 1990; Birch and Lee 1997; Russell 2002). I was puzzled that the white flank area of the present bird seemed to vary in size with different viewings. Examination of the literature indicated that this feature has been noted previously, as illustrated by Birch and Lee (1997) for three Arctic Loons in alternate plumage on Kolyma River in Siberia in June 1991 that possess white flanks that vary widely in area (their Figure 9). They also illustrate (their Figure 11) that when an Arctic Loon swims low in the water, the white flank patch may not be visible. The latter feature was also described in some detail by McCaskie *et al.* (1990) (and G. A. McCaskie personal correspondence 2002), who added the interesting explanation that actively diving Arctic Loons compress their feathers to the extent that the white sides are seen only near the vent area. Russell (2002:3) noted that Arctic Loons in all plumages consistently show "*upward flaring patches at sides of rump* (femoral tract), which may be the only area of white visible on active birds," while Pacific Loons never do and typically show at most a narrow line of white above the waterline.

The general absence of chinstraps and vent straps on Arctic Loons is another feature that distinguishes them from Pacific Loons. Generally, chinstraps are absent from Arctic Loons, while most Pacific Loons have chinstraps in basic plumage; and vent straps are absent or faint on Arctics, while present in all plumages on Pacifics (Walsh 1988; Roberson 1989; McCaskie *et al.* 1990; Reinking and Howell 1993; Birch and Lee 1997; Russell 2002). In discussing chinstraps and vent straps, Reinking and Howell (1993) pointed out that one of the "Arctic Loons" in all four of Roberson's (1989) photographs of Arctic and Pacific loon specimens (Roberson's Figures 1 to 4) is actually a Pacific Loon. In their study, Reinking and Howell (1993) examined six Arctic and 150 Pacific loon specimens and showed that the chinstrap "is absent on most if not all" Arctic Loons, while Pacific Loons usually have indistinct or distinct chinstraps. Reinking and Howell (1993) also indicated that Arctic Loons have a faint or no strap at the sides of the vent, while Pacific Loons have a partial, if not complete, vent strap in all plumages.

Interestingly enough, a basic plumaged Arctic Loon with prominent flank patches was also seen and studied by Guy Monty, Candace Boyle and others on 7 February 2001 by Lantzville (near Nanaimo), B.C. (Bain and Shanahan 2001;

Cecile 2001; Guy Monty personal communication 2002; Table 1). Lantzville is located only 23 km. from Roberts Creek, directly across Georgia Strait. Thus, it is probable that both of these sightings were of the same bird.

As the Pacific Loon is a "spectacularly abundant and conspicuous migrant" along the Pacific Coast (Russell 2002:1) and was considered conspecific with the Arctic Loon for most of the 20th century under the name Arctic Loon, most B.C. coastal ornithological literature indicates that Arctic Loons are abundant in this province. Virtually all of these records are of Pacific Loons, with the North American range of Arctic Loon confined primarily to a small portion of northern coastal Alaska (Russell 2002: Figure 2). After these loons were split into two species in 1985, two Arctic Loon specimen records from Comox in November 1891 and Victoria in March 1906 were listed by Godfrey (1986:21) as the only Canadian records. However, Campbell *et al.* (1990:160) report that when these specimens were re-examined according to the criteria listed by Walsh (Walsh 1988), they were determined to be Pacific Loons. Accordingly, the Arctic Loon sightings near Lantzville, B.C. on 7 February 2002 by Guy Monty, Candace Boyle, Colin Bartlett and others (Bain and Shanahan 2001; Cecile 2001; G. Monty personal communication 2002) and the Roberts Creek sightings on 18 and 23 March 2002 represent the only two reasonably documented reports of Arctic Loons in British Columbia, although details of the Lantzville sighting have not yet been published in detail and details of neither have been reviewed by any rare bird records committee.

A single person sighting by David Allinson of an Arctic Loon in Active Pass, Gulf Islands, British Columbia on 9 March 2002 (Allinson 2002) was not accepted as a positive record by the Victoria Bird Records Committee (B. Gates personal communication 2005).

Listing rare bird sightings for a given area is not a simple matter, as there are no generally accepted guidelines, different organizations differ in their acceptance criteria, and there are provinces and states that either have no bird records committee or, as in the case of British Columbia currently, have such a committee that is not functioning. Accordingly, in this manuscript I have listed North American sightings south of Alaska (Table 1, page 14) under three categories. "Accepted records" are sightings normally seen by more than one person, that have sufficient documentation to satisfy a review committee that the identification was accurate and with the documentation and committee deliberations archived in a published journal that can be examined readily by interested parties. "Documented records, not yet reviewed" are usually sightings that were seen by more than one person, with descriptions that have been documented, but not yet reviewed, with sighting details that are reasonably available for inspection. "Unconfirmed reports, not yet reviewed" are usually single person sightings that have little or no documentation and that have not been reviewed.

Table 1 lists a total of 17 possible North American records of Arctic Loons south of Alaska, with nine of them occurring in British Columbia and the U.S. "Pacific northwest" (Washington and Oregon), the province and states bordering the northeastern coast of the Pacific Ocean. Some published records of "Arctic" Loons have been identified subsequently as other species. Examination of photographs of a bird identified as an Arctic Loon in Wahkiakum County, Washington on 30 December 1998 (Emlen 1999) showed it to be a Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*) (Steven Mlodinow personal communication 2002). Also, photographs of all single loons on 3 - 4 October 2000 from Hayden Lake, Couer d'Alene, Kootenai County, Idaho showed them to be Red-throated Loons instead of Arctic Loons. (Some sightings were of two loons (Stephen Lindsay personal communication 2002). Similarly, details of a published May 1992 record from Bolinas Lagoon, California were later considered insufficient for positive identification by the California Bird Records Committee (Patten *et al.* 1995; Russell 2002) as were reports from Mendocino Headlands State Park in December 1994 (Rottenborn and Morlan 2000) and Bodega Bay in November 1996 (McCaskie and San Miguel 1999).

Of the records in Table 1, 14 are in the categories Accepted or Documented Records not yet Reviewed, a number bound to increase once some of the recent records have been reviewed. As noted by Mlodinow and Tweit (2001b), the number of different birds involved in these sightings is difficult to determine, as several of the reports must involve the same bird. Russell (2002) considered all east coast records from the early literature and recent Christmas bird counts, such as those at Newburyport, Massachusetts on 27 December 1992 (Berry 1993), Barnegat, New Jersey on 30 December 1990 (Vogel 1991) and offshore Atlantic Ocean, New Jersey on 19 December 1990 (Ryan 1991), as well as all inland North American records to be insufficiently documented to be considered as valid. However, the more recent Priest Rapids, Washington and Colorado records appear to constitute valid inland records.

A good portion of the northwestern contiguous U.S. states and B.C. reports occurred during the past several years. It is interesting to speculate on whether the increased number of recent sightings is due to unusual weather phenomena, increased birder vigilance, the availability of more and better identification information, better optical equipment and/or a possible range expansion. The known breeding distribution of Arctic Loons in Alaska was extended recently (Douglas and Sowl 1993), possibly reflecting increased exploration of unsettled parts of Alaska rather than a true range expansion (Russell 2002).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks Stephen Lindsay, Guy McCaskie, Steven Mlodinow and Harry Nehls for supplying information regarding U.S.A. Arctic Loon sightings and Steven Mlodinow and Mary Taitt for critical comments.

LITERATURE CITED

- Bain, M. and D. Shanahan. 2001. Cross Canada round-up February and March 2001. *Birders['] Journal* 10:62-80.
- Berry, J. 1993. The ninety-third Christmas Bird Count. Newburyport, MA. *American Birds* 47:584.
- Birch, A. and C.-T. Lee. 1997. Arctic and Pacific loons: field identification. *Birding* 29:106-115.
- Campbell, R. W., N. K. Dawe, I. McTaggart-Cowan, J. M. Cooper, G. W. Kaiser and M. C. E. McNall. 1990. The birds of British Columbia. Volume 1. Royal British Columbia Museum, Victoria.
- Cecile, D. G. 2001. Winter season: December 2000 through February 2001. British Columbia-Yukon. *North American Birds* 55:215-218.
- Douglas, H. and K. Sowl. 1993. Northeastern extension of the breeding range of the Arctic Loon in northwestern Alaska. *Western Birds* 24:98-100.
- Dunn, J. L. and B. J. Rose. 1992. A further note on Arctic Loon identification. *Birding* 24:106-107.
- Emlen, A. 1999. The ninety-ninth Christmas Bird Count. Wahkiakum, WA. *American Birds* page 498.
- Garrett, K. L. and D. S. Singer. 1998. Report of the California Bird Records Committee: 1995 records. *Western Birds* 29:133-156.
- Godfrey, W. E. 1986. The birds of Canada. Revised edition. National Museums of Canada, Ottawa.
- Harrison, P. 1995. Seabirds: an identification guide. revised edition. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.
- Lillie, G. 1998. Field notes: western Oregon, spring 1998. *Oregon Birds* 24:130-136.
- McCaskie, G. 1998. The winter season: December 1, 1997 to February 28, 1998. Southern Pacific Coast region. *Field Notes* 52:256-260.
- McCaskie, G., J. L. Dunn, C. Roberts and D. A. Sibley. 1990. Notes on identifying Arctic and Pacific loons in alternate plumage. *Birding* 22:70-73.
- McCaskie, G. and M. San Miguel. 1999. Report of the California Bird Records Committee: 1996 records. *Western Birds* 30:57-85.
- McClure, E. 1999. The ninety-eighth Christmas Bird Count. Thousand Oaks, California. *American Birds* page 450.

- Mlodinow, S., G. Lillie and B. Tweit. 2001. The spring migration: March through May 2001. Oregon-Washington. *North American Birds* 55:347-351.
- Mlodinow, S., B. Tice and B. Tweit. 2000a. Winter season: December 1999 through February 2000. Oregon-Washington. *North American Birds* 54:214-218.
- Mlodinow, S. and B. Tweit. 2001a. Fall migration: August through November 2000. Oregon-Washington. *North American Birds* 55:93-97.
- Mlodinow, S. and B. Tweit. 2001b. Winter season: December 2000 through February 2001. Oregon-Washington. *North American Birds* 55:219-222.
- Mlodinow, S. G., G. Lillie and B. Tweit. 2000b. Spring migration: March through May 2000. Oregon-Washington. *North American Birds* 54:318-322.
- Patten, M. A., S. E. Finnegan and P. E. Lehman. 1995. Seventeenth report of the California Bird Records Committee: 1991 records. *Western Birds* 26:113-143.
- Reinking, D. L. and S. N. G. Howell. 1993. An Arctic Loon in California. *Western Birds* 24:189-196.
- Roberson, D. 1989. More on Pacific versus Arctic loons. *Birding* 21:154-157.
- Rogers, M. M. and A. Jaramillo. 2002. Report of the California Bird Records Committee: 1999 records. *Western Birds* 33:1-33.
- Rottenborn, S. C. and J. Morlan. 2000. Report of the California Bird Records Committee: 1997 records. *Western Birds* 31:1-37.
- Russell, R. W. 2002. Pacific Loon *Gavia pacifica* [;] Arctic Loon *Gavia arctica*. No. 657 in A. Poole and F. Gill (Editors). The birds of North America. The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia.
- Ryan, R. 1991. The ninety-first Christmas bird count. Atlantic Ocean (offshore), NJ. *American Birds* 45:654.
- Schulenberg, T. 1989. More on Pacific versus Arctic loons. *Birding* 21:157-158.
- Truan, V. A., B. K. Percival and C. L. Wood. 2003. The fall migration: August through November 2002. Mountain west. *North American Birds* 57:89-91.
- van Niel, S. and J. van Niel. 2000. One-hundredth Christmas bird count. Edmonds, WA. *American Birds* page 510.
- Vogel, T. 1991. The ninety-first Christmas bird count. Barnegat, NJ. *American Birds* 45:655.
- Walsh, T. 1988. Identifying Pacific Loons. Some old and new problems. *Birding* 20:12-28.
- Wild Bird Society of Japan (edited by K. Sonobe). 1985. A guide to the birds of Japan. Kodansha International, Tokyo.
- Wilson, J. C. 2002. The 102nd Christmas bird count. California. *American Birds* page 85.

UNPUBLISHED DOCUMENTS CITED

- Allinson, D. 2002.
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/bcbirdingvanisland/message#1564>, 14 March 2002.