

REPORT OF A YELLOW-BILLED LOON: COMMENTARY

by Richard A. Forster, Framingham

On 14 November 1982, six observers were studying loons at Salisbury beach. Both Common (Gavia immer) and Red-throated (G. stellata) loons were present for comparison, and during the course of their observation, they noticed a particular individual that appeared different. They studied the loon for slightly more than an hour, took notes in the field, and made sketches which they submitted with their report. Their conclusion was that the bird was probably a Yellow-billed Loon (Gavia adamsii).

Most of the current popular field guides treat both Common and Yellow-billed loons but provide only perfunctory clues to specific identification. Observers on the west coast, where Yellow-billed Loon is a rare but annual winter visitor from Washington to northern California, recognize the difficulty in separating the two species in non-breeding (basic) plumage. In a detailed article on the field identification of the Yellow-billed Loon (Western Birds, Vol. 5, No. 4, 1974), L. C. Binford and J. V. Remsen, Jr., examine this problem at length. Using the salient points of their paper, I offer the following brief analysis of the Yellow-billed Loon report from Salisbury.

This report describes several specific characteristics that were considered different - size, head, bill, neck and back. Each of these will be presented in this note and compared with the Western Birds article.

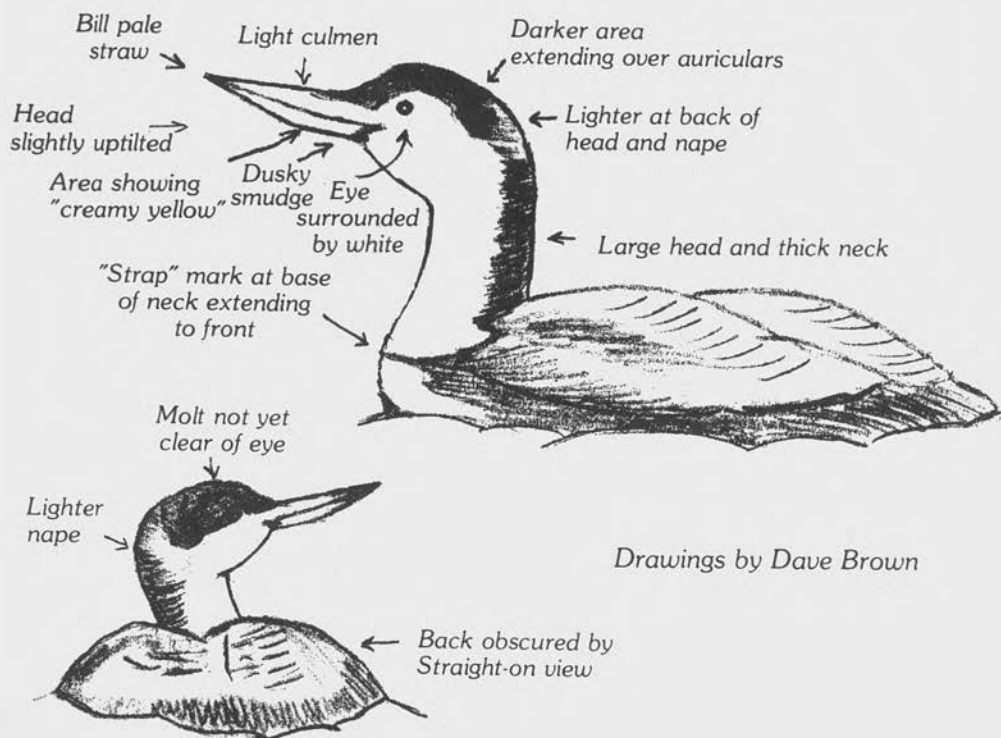
The observers noted that the loon was large, at least as large as the Commons, and it dwarfed a Red-throated Loon that was seen in direct comparison. Within both species the males average larger than the females although for the same age and sex, Yellow-bills average larger. Binford and Remsen point out, however, that there is extensive variation in most dimensions, especially among Commons, and that there is considerable overlap between the two species. Although size can be used as an indicator, it cannot be used to determine specific identity.

The six observers thought the head looked massive in proportion to the body, and the head to body ratio seemed greater than in the nearby Commons. One observer described the head as "bulbous." Also, the neck was considered thick and heavy. Binford and Remsen state that the Yellow-billed Loon has a disproportionally thick neck, the result of longer neck feathers, and this causes the body and especially the head to appear smaller.

Bill shape is an indicator for specific identity. The observers mentioned that the upper mandible was straight to

the tip where there was only the faintest hint of a "slight tiny decurve." This is consistent with the Yellow-billed Loon but is a subjective distinction even when seen at close range. They also stated that there was a sharp gonydeal angle. Binford and Remsen measured a large number of specimens and arrived at a mean gonydeal angle of  $190.7^\circ$  for Common and  $191.2^\circ$  for Yellow-billed. Thus, the degree of gonydeal angularity seems hardly a useful field characteristic. Another field mark mentioned by the observers was that the bill was totally light, including the culmen. A pale culmen is one of the definitive field marks for identifying Yellow-billed Loon. The culmen of the Common Loon is usually dark almost to the tip in most individuals and in all individuals at least the basal half of the culmen is dark. The closest the Salisbury bird was seen was estimated to be 175 yards in a rolling surf. Was the culmen actually pale or did it only appear pale?

Another definitive field mark for Yellow-billed Loon is a dark auricular (ear) patch located about one inch posterior to, and slightly below, the eye. The patch is roughly the size of a dime and is usually connected with the dark crown by less dark coloration. The area immediately behind the ear patch is pale, leading to the darker hind neck. Although the observers alluded to a patch of darker brown running from the crown down into the auricular area, the detailed sketches fail to show the distinctive ear patch.



Two sketches submitted by the Salisbury group show an extension of dark ("strap mark") onto the foreneck from the side of the body at the base of the neck. The Western Birds article states that the malar region, chin, throat and foreneck of both species are whitish except that most individuals of the Common Loon have dusky flecking across the anteriormost part of the neck. This extension is much paler in the Yellow-billed Loon and may be lacking in many individuals.

In sum, there are characteristics of the Salisbury loon that are suggestive of Yellow-billed Loon while other field marks point to Common Loon. Considering the extreme rarity of Yellow-billed Loon in eastern North America, the record should best be considered a hypothetical sighting. However, the observers are to be congratulated for making detailed notes and sketches which prove extremely useful in evaluating records of vagrant species. If more observers would make such diligent efforts, the aura of doubt around many records could be better eliminated.

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RICHARD A. FORSTER, Assistant Director of Natural History Services at Massachusetts Audubon Society, is chairman of the Records Committee which investigates and evaluates reports of "rare birds," that is, sightings unusual as to species, numbers, location, or season.

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The report of the Yellow-billed Loon was submitted by Dave Brown, Glenn d'Entremont, Erik Nielsen, Robert Campbell, and Herman D'Entremont.

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#### SPRING HAWK WATCH

The Eastern Massachusetts Hawk Watch will conduct coordinated weekend watches on three weekends this spring. Coastal sites, especially on Cape Cod, Crane's Beach, and Plum Island, present the best opportunities on April 16-17. Both coastal and inland sites offer excellent opportunities on April 23-24 and April 30-May 1, weather permitting. Volunteer observers are needed for all three weekends. No experience is required, and your help on any date would be appreciated.

We are also seeking individuals who can hawkwatch (if the weather is favorable) on Plum Island on any days between April 10 and May 7 or on Wachusett Mountain between April 20 and May 7.

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