OBSERVATIONS OF MIGRATING RED-THROATED LOONS

by Julie Zickefoose

October 30, 1988 was a clear cold day with a brisk northwest wind. I was carrying a large container of mealworms (for my pet birds) across my backyard on Dolbia Hill in East Haddam, Connecticut, approximately twelve miles from the coast. Hearing a chorus of unfamiliar calls, I looked up to see a large flock of waterfowl several hundred feet overhead. Throwing the mealworms into the air, I raced to the house, ran in the backdoor, snatched my binoculars, ran out the front, and focused on the birds. Starting out as a dense ball, the flock quickly formed into three wavering Vs. There were at least 150 birds, but what were they? Suddenly they veered, giving me a view of their profiles. Entirely white below, they were silvery gray to charcoal above. Their pointed, narrow wings, rapid wingbeats, slender bodies, and tapered shape fore and aft convinced me that they were Red-throated Loons *(Gavia stellata)*. Their distinctive call, however, proved most helpful in identification—a low, dry, staccato quacking that sounded remarkably like a spring chorus of wood frogs. As soon as the birds were out of sight, I played Kellogg and Allen's recording of the calls of Red-throats, confirming the identification.

That same afternoon, veteran birder Jay Hand was on a ladder, patching his roof in Old Lyme. Hearing "barking" calls overhead, he looked up to see three ragged chevrons of at least a hundred birds in all, high overhead. In what must be every birder's nightmare, he realized that the flock would be out of sight before he could descend and find his binoculars. He was able to observe that the birds were moving too fast, with too rapid a wingbeat to be geese, and the call did not match any goose calls he knew. Jay's flock passed over, heading south, around 3:30 P.M., whereas mine was seen at noon. It would seem that October 30 was a good flight day for Red-throated Loons. As Jay said, "I had never before seen a flock of migrating Red-throats. They always just magically appear on the coast, and I've never thought much about how they arrive there."

How unusual is an inland flock of 150 Red-throats? Most observations I found were made along the coast, not over land, and many seemed to reiterate Bent's (1919) report:

> The migration along the New England coast is mainly in October. When travelling they fly at a great height and in a direct course along the shore, a mile or two out from land; they usually fly singly, although several are in sight at one time, widely scattered. There is, however, some sociability among them, most noticeable on foggy days, when they manage to keep in touch with each other by frequent interchange of call notes, as if helping each other to

> maintain the same general line of flight. They are even somewhat gregarious at times, gathering in small parties on the water to rest and calling to their passing companions; these gatherings are sometimes quite noisy, and are well known to gunners as "loon caucuses."

The gregariousness of Red-throats, at least on water, is well-recognized. Palmer (1962) notes:

> In the interior, they are a rarity in fall except on the Great Lakes, where loose associations of as many as 1200 individuals have been seen in October (Lake Ontario). No doubt all but the few remaining there to winter continue on to the Atlantic coast.

On favored feeding waters off Cape May, New Jersey, Stone (1937) reported flocks of up to 175 birds and, in spring migration, flocks of up to 500. Ogilvie (1976) cites flocks of several hundred seen on migration in Europe.

There is a difference, however, between flocks on feeding grounds and inland flocks such as the one I observed. Abundant food, rather than a tendency toward true social flocking, could motivate formation of feeding rafts. Only one reference specifically mentioned a large flying flock (61 individuals) off Point aux Basques, Quebec (Lewis 1937).

Records kept at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in eastern Pennsylvania show a flock of ten Red-throats passing over on October 30, 1986, the largest flock seen there. A total of eleven Red-throats was seen that year, their peak thus far (L. Goodrich, personal communication).

Loon expert Dr. Judith W. McIntyre commented, "There are regular migrations over the northeastern United States, but often they are very high up, and your sighting is a lucky observation. The number of birds in the flock is not as exciting to me as the fact that they were flying in V-formation. To my knowledge, no species of loon is known to fly in formation." Although nonplanar clusters, such as the large ball of loons I first saw, probably carry no energy-saving benefit for flock members (Higdon and Corrsin 1978), V-formations confer a real advantage. Badgerow (1988) showed that Canada Geese flying in formation enjoy an average energy savings of about ten percent over solo flight. He goes on to note that this advantage "could translate as greater flight range [or] greater reserves at the end of a flight." Either advantage would seem desirable for a flock of loons far from water and food, and it is interesting that although Red-throats are described as gregarious, observations of formation flight are absent in the literature.

This was not to be my last encounter with Red-throated Loons that fall. One week later, on November 6, I was driving east on Interstate 95 from New London to Groton, Connecticut. A small blotch in the sky ahead resolved into a

clumped flock of seven east-bound Red-throats flying parallel to the highway. I slowed down slightly to keep pace with them and managed to clock them at 48 mph for just under one mile, before they veered south down the Thames River toward Long Island Sound. (This maneuver is not for the fainthearted, especially when performed on the Groton-New London bridge. Better birders than I have driven off the road for less.) Terres (1980) lists flight speed of two clocked in Alaska as 47.1 and 48.8 mph. Knowing these birds may be overhead in late October, perhaps more birders will listen for the low quack of the Red-throated Loon and add to our scant knowledge of this graceful diver.

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JULIE ZICKEFOOSE, a Connecticut artist and writer whose work appears with increasing regularity in ornithological books, journals, and magazines, resides in Hadlyme, acting as overseer of a Nature Conservancy property with fellow artist, bird carver Robert Braunfield. Julie's enthusiasm for birds began with her first warblers: Yellow-rumps—"I couldn't believe how lovely they were"—and "a bathing Blue-winged, in the swamp behind my house. I was maybe eight and had crept up on him on my belly through the catbrier." She has since "been obsessed with birds, drawing them, raising and patching them." This involvement currently includes pet parrots and rehabilitating a cat-mauled Blue Jay.