

IDENTIFICATION OF ARCTIC LOONS

by J. T. Leverich, Boston

Common Loons (Gavia immer) are familiar winter visitors throughout Massachusetts, but especially along the coast. Numerous sightings of the Arctic Loon (Gavia arctica) in winter plumage have also been reported, but these identifications have almost always been based on bill characteristics, a miserable field mark at best. Such reports must necessarily remain in question.

There are, however, valid field characters for the Arctic Loon in Basic plumage, and a few of these winter sightings are certainly correct. Moreover, Arctic Loons have occasionally been observed in summer plumage, and specimens have been obtained from neighboring states. Hence, it is likely that this species will eventually prove to be a very rare but regular winter visitor to our shores.

The diagnostic characters for the two species are actually rather clear-cut and easy to see. The problem has been that they are almost entirely unknown to Eastern birders. Painted illustrations in the field guides are misleading, and textual descriptions are often wrong. European field guides are not much better, but the new Handbook of the Birds of Europe, the Middle East and North Africa (see C below) is, as always, a treasury of valuable information.

Most field problems are very painful to the average birder, but I think that you will enjoy learning about this one. There are many more field marks to be seen on a Common Loon than one might have suspected. Practice seeing them all. If you are accustomed to seeing everything on this familiar species, and if you should be lucky enough to encounter a wintering Arctic Loon, you will almost certainly recognize it.

As each field mark is discussed below, a coded reference is given to the illustrations in currently available field guides and certain other books

- P = Richard H. Pough, 1951. Audubon Water Bird Guide, Garden City. Illustrations by Don Eckelberry. Plate 1, after p. 162.
- F = Roger Tory Peterson, 1947. A Field Guide to the Birds, Boston. Plate 1.
- R = Chandler S. Robbins, 1966. A Guide to Field Identification Birds of North America, New York. Illustrations by Arthur Singer, p. 19.
- E = John Bull and John Farrand, Jr., 1978. The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, Eastern Region, New York. Photographs 190 (and 187 and 188 for summer plumage).
- W = Miklos D. F. Udvardy, 1978. The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, Western Region, New York. Photographs 170 and 173.
- C = Stanley Cramp, ed., 1977. The Birds of the Western Palearctic, Vol. 1, Oxford. Figure 1 (p. 43), Plate 4 (Black-throated Diver = Arctic Loon, before p. 39); Plate 5 (Great Northern Diver = Common Loon, after p. 62); Plate 6 (flight patterns of loons, after p. 62)
- S = Arnold Small, 1974. The Birds of California, New York. Photographs p. 157 of Pacific Loon (Arctic Loon) and p. 164 of Common Loon.

Each illustration or photograph is evaluated according to the following

code:

- ++ Excellent portrayal of the field mark
- + Good portrayal
- 0 Field mark not visible (because of lighting, position of the bird, etc.)
- Field mark is only suggested, or poorly shown
- The painting is quite incorrect and misleading.

Field Marks

1. Bill shape and color

The bills of both species are fairly dark and straight. That of the Common Loon is usually larger and heavier than that of the Arctic Loon. Young birds have lighter bills (in both species).

At times, because of the lighting, even the darkest bills may appear white or yellow. The bill may also appear upturned. Some bills appear strongly angled, as in the Red-throated and Yellow-billed Loons. All in all, bill shape and color is surely one of the worst field marks for distinguishing these two species. Much of the confused identification in the past can be traced to over-reliance on this field mark.

2. Forehead structure

Common Loons have a decided angle to the forehead, almost a "bump." The forehead of the Arctic Loon is lower and rounder, smoother. (Curiously, this mark is much less observable in the summer plumages of the two species.)

P++;F+;R++;E++;W++;C++;S -(Arctic), ++(Common).

3. Eye-ring

Almost all Common Loons in winter plumage show a white eye-ring; Arctic Loons never do. The eye-ring, when present, is readily observable even at a distance. P++;F+;R++;E++;W+;C++;S+ (NOTE: The Common Loon illustrated in E has so much white on the face that the eye-ring dissolves into the generally white lower face region, i.e., the entire eye lies in the white facial region. In the Arctic Loon, the white of the face never extends this high.)

4. Pre-ocular patch

On an Arctic Loon, the region immediately in front of the eye is usually the darkest and blackest part of the entire head.

P--;F--;R-;W++;C-;S+

5. Bulk of the neck

The neck of the Common Loon is noticeably bulkier than that of the Arctic Loon. It appears fatter, less willowy. Unfortunately, this apparent bulk is due to the shape and length of the neck feathers, not to any physiological difference. Apparently, a Common Loon can sleek down the neck feathers, and it therefore may not display this mark at all times. Furthermore, all too often the loon's neck will be retracted, and the relative bulkiness will be difficult to judge.

P 0;F++;R++;E++;W-;C+;S+

6. Neck markings (Very diagnostic)

The neck of the Common Loon is definitely two-toned, white in front

and brownish in back. The boundary curve between these two areas is characteristic. In the Common Loon this is a curve, with a slight indentation behind the eye and a large and very obvious white patch halfway down the neck. This latter occurs at the same point as the large striped area in the summer plumage. In life, this indentation is usually quite obvious. P O; F--;R-;E++;W++;C++;S++

The neck of the Arctic Loon is actually three-toned; white in front, a light grayish brown in back, with a thin darkish stripe between these two colors on the upper half of the side of the neck. The grayish color of the hindneck contrasts noticeably with the exceptionally dark back in the Arctic Loon, the neck appearing much paler than the back. The reverse of this pattern is true of the Common Loon (the hindneck is darker than the back). The hindneck-back contrast is an excellent field mark for the Arctic Loon. P--;F--;R--;W+;C++;S++

The dark line on the side of the neck is much harder to see, although it is clear enough in the proper light. It is perhaps easier to note that the rear border of the white area on the neck of the Arctic Loon is essentially a straight line, with no indented half-collar and no extension of white onto the face. P O;F-;R+;W++;C++;S++

7. Chinstrap

On some Arctic Loons, there are a few brown spots across the throat at the very top of the neck, rather like a chin-strap. Apparently the Common Loon never shows this mark. P O;F--;R--;W+;C-;S++

8. Mantle Color

In winter the plumage of the Arctic Loon darkens more than that of any other diver, becoming decidedly darker than the color of the crown and hindneck. All loons appear to sit low in the water, but the very dark brown back on this bird gives the impression of an unusually low carriage. In juvenile birds the mantle color is less uniform, appearing somewhat scaly in good light because of gray feather margins. P--;F-;R-;W++;C++;S++

9. Thigh patch

Arctic Loons often show a distinctive white thigh patch which is observable at great distances. None of the field guides show this mark. It is (poorly) visible in the photograph (p. 157) of Small's book.

Apparently, this patch is also present on the summer plumage of the bird. On Plate 4 of Cramp and Simmons, the patch is clearly visible on the summer plumage, but it is not shown on the winter plumage. The mark was first reported in the Letters column of British Birds, Vol. 71, No. 5, pp. 225-226. It is apparently a valid field mark and yet not a genuine plumage characteristic. The white blaze is nothing more than a continuation of the white underparts. Ordinarily, these underparts show as white sides, white all along the entire length of the body, but sometimes Arctic Loons sit so low in the water that only these rear flanks flash white. P-;F--;R-;W-;C++;S++

10. Diving style (from a letter by Stephen Jackson in British Birds, 71(7), p. 317)

"On inland waters, I have noticed that Great Northern Divers Gavia immer

always slither under slowly when diving, whereas Black-throated G. arctica jump upwards slightly before they dive. Depth of water appears to be irrelevant: in February 1978, I watched a Black-throated Diver and a Great Northern Diver swimming and feeding together on Foremark Reservoir, Derbyshire; several times they surfaced within a metre or so of each other, yet their diving actions remained distinct enough to enable them to be distinguished even at a distance such that they appeared mere blobs on the water."

I hope that the above material will convince the reader that field identification of the Arctic Loon in winter plumage is certainly not impossible. In some senses, it is not even difficult. Close observation is required, as well as careful attention to a combination of marks rather than one single identifying feature. Reports of wintering Arctic Loons must continue to be carefully scrutinized. Submitted reports should contain comments on all of these features mentioned above, as well as other descriptive remarks concerning color, size, etc.

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