

Red-throated Loon Sightings on Ship and Horn Islands, Mississippi

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On 14 June 1977, while watching birds on East Ship Island, Mississippi (12 miles south of Biloxi), I observed a small loon which I readily identified as a winter-plumaged Red-throated Loon (Gavia stellata). I studied the bird for about 30 minutes through a 20X to 45X zoom telescope; although it remained about 100 yards offshore, viewing conditions were excellent (sun behind observer). I noted the following field marks: size, estimated to be smaller than a Common Loon, Gavia immer (although no Common Loons or other waterbirds were nearby for comparison); bill very slender, with lower mandible upturned, and held at an angle above the horizontal (this last feature, a good field mark of the species, is not mentioned in current field guides, but is noted by Binford and Remsen, 1974:120); throat white and face much more extensively white than in Common Loon, with white surrounding eyes; back gray, but white spotting not visible because of distance. A full description is on file at Mississippi State University. I have had extensive field experience with all 4 loon species in the Pacific Northwest.

On 14 January 1978 I found another Red-throated Loon off the north beach of Horn Island, Mississippi, about 4 miles from the west end of the island. This bird was observed for 10 minutes at a distance of about 200 yards, also at magnifications of up to 45X, and again the sun was shining from behind me for most of the observation period. The bird was small for a loon (Common Loons were seen nearby, but not in direct comparison); the face, throat, and front of the neck were immaculate white; the crown and back of the neck were pale gray, and the back a somewhat darker gray, but still paler than in the Common Loon. The bill was slender and slightly upturned, and was held well above the horizontal.

I know of only 4 previous reports of Red-throated Loon sightings in Mississippi, all of them between November and February. The first was seen at Biloxi on 6 February 1960 by Buford M. Myers (MOS Newsletter 5 (4):6, 1960). On 28 November 1960, Lovett E. Williams, Jr. found another bird at Gulfport (MOS Newsletter 5(5):8, 1960); a second sighting at Gulfport by Williams on 17 December 1960, on file at the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science, may refer to the same individual. The fourth sighting was one seen at Gulfport on 7 December 1969 by W. Marvin Davis (MOS Newsletter 16(1):3, 1971; Audubon Field Notes 24:511, 1970).

Red-throated Loons winter as far south as Baja California, Texas, and Florida. In Louisiana, there are only 4 records, ranging in date from 4 December to 14 March (Lowery 1974). In Alabama, at least 17 records span the period 1 November to 1 May (Imhof 1976; American Birds 31:187, 1977). The Ship Island sighting appears to be the only summer Red-throated Loon record from the central Gulf Coast; however, the species does occur annually in summer as far south as northern

California (American Birds 29:1025, 1975 and 30:997, 1976; Weber, personal observation) and Virginia (American Birds 29:955, 1975 and 30:938, 1976). Red-throated Loons apparently take at least 2 years to reach maturity, and immature birds normally remain on salt water (Godfrey 1966:14). Thus it is not totally unexpected that an occasional bird should remain in summer even near the extreme southern edge of the species' wintering range, as is true of the Common Loon. In future, therefore, Mississippi observers should watch for Red-throated Loons not only in winter, but also in summer!

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