

THE NESTING OF THE RED-THROATED LOON ON VANCOUVER ISLAND, BRITISH COLUMBIA

By THEED PEARSE

The Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*) has never, to my knowledge, been recorded as breeding on Vancouver Island. Bent (Life Hist. N. Amer. Diving Birds, U. S. Nat. Mus. Bull. 107, 1919:80) gives Graham Island, Queen Charlotte Islands, as the most southerly breeding station on the Pacific coast. Graham Island is at least 400 miles north of the nesting station on Vancouver Island herein described.

These loons nested on a small lake, about 12 acres in extent, some eight miles north of Courtenay, British Columbia, in 1942. This lake, evidently the remnant of a larger body of water, is deep, with a shore line that falls off quickly. All round there is a thick covering of bush, hardhack chiefly, which extends back several yards. Beyond is a more stunted growth of the same shrubs, scattered pines, alders and crab trees, which in places is almost impenetrable. In the center of the lake is a small island, an acre or so in area, with several pines and the same scrubby growth. I have not been on this island but have been told there is practically no firm land there. Like the shore-line it consists of quaking peat moss that is very tricky to get about on owing to the unseen potholes.

It was on April 22 that I first saw the Red-throated Loons at the lake. They may have been there in previous years, as I had not looked over the lake for several years, and then only in the winter. On this date the two loons were merely swimming around, with no suggestion of nesting.

My next visit was on May 8; one bird was seen swimming near the north point of the island, where there is a good growth of marsh grass and rushes; its actions suggested it had some interest in this particular area. I was able to make use of an old upturned fir stub as a blind just opposite this point, only about 100 yards away. After a little time the bird moved toward the point, at first in a hesitating manner, but all the time drawing nearer. When it reached the point, it continued swimming, and disappeared behind some tufts of grass or rushes. I then saw it clambering up in an open space between these tufts where it stood, and below it the outline of the nest was plainly visible. I watched the bird arrange the eggs and adjust itself on the nest. The loon sat facing outward, all the time moving its head to look around. While I watched, the other bird appeared, swimming around but never approaching the nest.

My next visit was on May 16. A loon was on the nest but it slipped off and dived, reappearing well out in the lake; it gradually worked back toward the nest and then dived to reappear on the far side of the point where it stayed facing us and would not go onto the nest.

On June 2, an adult, presumably the female, was swimming on the lake followed by two young. The young swam behind or at her side and did not attempt to get on their mother's back. They looked about a week old and were very dark in color. While watching the family party, the other bird appeared with a fish dangling from the beak; it gradually worked up to the others by a series of dives. When it eventually came up to them, none of them seemed at all interested; the fish looked much too large to be fed to the young as it was. The adult then mauled the fish in the water in the usual loon fashion, the others swimming away. Shortly, they all joined up and the fish had gone. The whole party then stayed together a short time, whereupon the female with the young swam out of sight into the surrounding cover. I did not see any attempt by the female to feed the young nor did they appear to be seeking food while swimming.

On June 21 no loons were to be seen on the lake. On June 29 the pair was present but there was no sign of the young. Because of the absence of young on these last dates and because I had seen a pair of Red-throated Loons on a small lake three miles away, where I had never seen any before, I concluded that the pair had lost their young. This was my last visit to the lake in 1942. I noticed, then, that the birds seemed to be losing the beautiful grey on the back which was getting dingy; the red throat was still prominent.



Fig. 60. Lake near Courtenay, Vancouver Island, British Columbia, where Red-throated Loons nested in 1942 and 1943. Island marked by near row of conifers; nest situated at right tip of island.

In 1943 my first visit to the lake was on May 15, and a loon was on its nest in the same place. The other bird was not seen. It was noticeable, particularly on this occasion, that the sitting bird blended into the surrounding foliage, with the neck looking like a dark, upright stake. A week later the bird was sitting very closely; it did not leave when I moved about within full sight. Although the day was generally cloudy and not hot, the loon seemed to suffer from the heat when the sun came out and would pant and hold the wings away from the body.

On June 5 the nest appeared flattened and more exposed. At first, no birds were visible, then there was a roar of wings which announced the arrival of a loon from the direction of the sea or the other lake (the volume of sound was much greater than a duck volplaning). As the bird approached the surface of the water, it swung around providing a full view of the feet spread out to break the impact. It was carrying a fish about six inches long. The bird came to rest close to where I was standing and then became hidden by the intervening growth; about ten minutes later it swam out and washed vigorously, turning completely on the back so that both feet were visible. After about ten minutes of preening, it disappeared into the same place and next appeared swimming along the shore-line followed by one small young, which I took to be not more than a week old. The youngster was quite lively, swimming about and diving. Once it appeared to dive under the parent to come up on the opposite side. The female kept close by all the time. While watching them a female Wood Duck (*Aix sponsa*) flew over, calling loudly, and appeared to make an attack on the loon. In any event, the loon was apprehensive of attack and dived; she shortly reappeared at the same place, but without the youngster which, presumably, had taken cover at the edge of the lake. Neither on this nor on any occasion when the old birds and young were together did I hear any call from either, but, as the parent went directly to the spot where the youngster was hidden, she must either have called it or have known where it was hiding; the spot was only 100 yards or so from the nest. Only one parent bird was seen on this occasion.

On June 29, after waiting half an hour, the two adults appeared and, as they swam along the shore of the island, the leading bird, which looked to be the larger, called two or three times, a low drawn-out single note *meou*. One bird displayed: with neck kinked it "ran" over the water, flapping its wings, then returned to the other bird. Shortly after one gave a goose-like *wah-kee*, repeated; this was quite different from the notes of either the Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) or the Arctic Loon (*Gavia arctica*). Later on the young bird could be seen, with its parents, off the other end of the island. It appeared to be about half their size and was floating with its head tucked into the feathers of the back. When I came into view, both adults kept close to the youngster but, when I stood still, they seemed to regain confidence and allowed the youngster to drift away.

In 1944 my first visit to the lake was on April 28. Two adults were swimming around all the time throughout the half hour I was there. On this occasion, the bird I took to be the female uttered a note, *chook-chook*, the other bird displayed once, stretching out the neck with the beak pointed upward, thus bringing very much into prominence the brilliant red patch on the throat. The displaying bird kept this position for some seconds without any other movement and then resumed the ordinary position.

On June 19 only one bird was seen. I do not think they reared young in this season, although they may have nested.

In 1945, on my two visits to the lake, the end of May and in June, there was no sign of the loons; on the second occasion there was a pair of Common Loons. The lake appeared higher this year and, possibly, the limited area available for a nesting site was flooded. I heard, too, that boys had been fishing there.

In 1946 on April 19 there were no loons on the lake. On May 29 two birds were seen near the old nesting site, but they appeared to be just idling, and on June 13 there was no sign of them.

Comox, Vancouver Island, British Columbia, May 13, 1946.