

Arctic Loon, a new species for Alabama

by Thomas A. Imhof¹

Most Alabama observers are well aware that small Common Loons occur here in winter and so are very cautious about identifying Red-throated or Arctic Loons. Thus on the Birmingham Christmas Count of December 27, 1975 Ann Miller and Charlotte Blackshear reported a small loon without further identification. On December 28 & 29 two parties consisting of Bruce Crider, Greg Jackson, John Dunnie and Thomas and Gina Imhof, Helen and Keith Kittinger independently identified the bird as an Arctic Loon, *Gavia arctica*. After viewing the bird at close quarters through December 31, many other observers concurred in the identification and the statement of field marks as listed below. In spite of overcast weather all four days, Helen Kittinger obtained several photographs at a distance in rather poor light.

The following distinctive field marks, not listed together in any one reference, were seen by all: the bill was straight; it was shorter than the head; its depth at the base was less than two eye diameters; the head was small, not double rounded as in the Common Loon; the color of the crown and hindneck was noticeably lighter than that of the back; the back had lighter edgings of the feathers, a characteristic of the immature Arctic Loon, whereas the Common Loon has all dark feathers and the Red-throated has white dots; the eye had no eye ring effect nor any white feathers in front of or above the eye as in the Common Loon (but it did have a white area below and behind the eye which is best depicted for all four loons by Don Eckelberry in R. H. Pough's *Audubon Water Bird Guide*, 1953). The bird was noted to be a little less than twice the length of the Pied-billed Grebe that frequently swam in front of it. Because of overlap, size cannot be used for positive identification, but it certainly told us that this bird was small enough to be an Arctic

A concerted effort was made on New Year's morning for many more observers to see the bird and for several in a boat to ease the bird toward shore where Helen Kittinger was to lie in wait with camera at the ready for a good closeup in good light. It failed off during the night as predicted, but the bird also took advantage of the break in weather to resume (we suppose) the last leg of its flight to the coast.

The northern Gulf Coast from the mouth of the Mississippi R. to St. Mark's Refuge probably winters more than 10,000 loons. A look at the breeding range of the Arctic Loon in the A. O. U. Check-list (1957) tells us that this loon is not a western bird as one might suppose, but a Holarctic one that breeds directly north of Alabama in the James Bay and Baffin Island areas, great suppliers of other water birds to our winter populations. It seems to us that not all the Arctic (Pacific) Loons must migrate so far westward to avoid much closer bodies of water like the Atlantic Ocean and especially the Gulf of Mexico which winter other loons very successfully.

This experience coming closely after Allan R. Phillips paper on the Semipalmated Sandpiper (*Am. Birds* 29: 799-806) prompts me to point out a need for a good method of measuring the volumes of bird's bills which might very likely eliminate the overlaps in length. Besides loons, peeps, and other species, many subspecies would be better delineated. Measuring cubic millimeters or centimeters of water displacement should work well with dead birds, but most live birds might not withstand sealing the nostril for more than a second or two.

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