

AN UNUSUAL HIGH COUNT OF PACIFIC LOONS FROM A FRESHWATER LAKE IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

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In the evening (approximately 20:30) of 5 June 2004, while traveling north on the Cassiar Highway (British Columbia Route 37), we stopped at the Hodder Lake Wayside (BC 37 km 246.5), located on the west shore of Hodder Lake some 90 km north of the intersection with BC 37A at Meziadin Junction. On this roughly 10-hectare lake we saw a scattered assortment of waterfowl and an extremely large, conspicuous raft of birds. From a distance of approximately 1 km, we scoped this group and observed a uniform, very tight mass of Pacific Loons (*Gavia pacifica*), all of which were in definitive alternate plumage (Figure 1). Counting in blocks of ten, we conservatively estimated 1070 individuals, and we noted that during our 20 minutes of viewing this group, none of the birds appeared to be diving. Also on the lake, away from this main raft, was an aggregation of 26 Common Loons (*G. immer*) and four Yellow-billed Loons (*G. adamsii*), also all in definitive alternate plumage. During the preceding hours, while we were driving the Cassiar Highway from Stewart, British Columbia, at the head of Portland Canal and tidewater, the weather was predominantly very low overcast with scattered drizzle and patchy ground-fog. At times along this stretch of road, the cloud cover and local fog was well below the adjacent ridges (1100–2000 m). There was little wind, and visibility rarely exceeded 1 km.



Figure 1. Part of a flock of about 1070 Pacific Loons on Hodder Lake, British Columbia, 5 June 2004.

Photo by Gary H. Rosenberg

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It seemed apparent that these loons were northbound migrants, probably funneling through the high plateau followed roughly by the Cassiar Highway, situated between the east flank of the Coast Range and the west slopes of the Skeena Mountains. Possibly this local intra-mountain weather disturbed or blocked a northward passage of loons, and Hodder Lake provided ample staging and reorientation habitat. With numerous large lakes in the general vicinity, such as Meziadin Lake ~90 km to the south, it seemed likely that these migrants were forced onto relatively small Hodder Lake as a result of immediate and local weather and geography. This area of the lower Cassiar lies approximately 100 km from the nearest tidewater, in Portland Canal, which empties to the southwest into the Gulf of Alaska and Dixon Entrance. The Pacific Loon breeds on interior lakes in northern British Columbia, in a disjunct population in the west-central part of the province, across the Yukon and Northwest Territories, and east through northern Manitoba to northwest Quebec (AOU 1998). Little is known or published relative to the loon's migration corridors away from the coast or into and through interior British Columbia or farther north into the Yukon and Northwest Territories.

From a literature search we found that no flocks of this size have been recorded away from the coast in British Columbia, the Yukon Territory, Alaska, or anywhere within the nearctic range of the Pacific Loon (Russell 2002, Campbell et al. 1990, Godfrey 1986). The Pacific Loon can be conspicuously abundant on migration, especially in spring along the Pacific coast (Campbell et al. 1990, Russell 2002), with a peak of spring abundance noted in coastal British Columbia between 1 May and 15 June (Gaston and Jones 1991). We, as well as Steven C. Heintz (pers. comm.), have observed numbers (~60) of presumed migrant Pacific Loons, usually in pairs or small groups, in late May and early June in Portland Canal. While spring migrants often stage at coastal sites with favorable resources, such staging is reported only sporadically from fresh water. Smaller numbers of migrating Pacific Loons, and groups of up to 200 Common Loons, have been recorded in the Yukon (Sinclair et al. 2003). "About 200" Pacific Loons were observed in northeast British Columbia once in a previous spring migration (Chris Siddle pers. comm.). Otherwise, essentially all references to large-scale or single-flock Pacific Loon migration counts come from winter concentrations, or from extended tallies of migrants flying by strategic coastal sites, mainly in California, Oregon, and Washington. The literature lists peak counts from noncoastal sites rarely exceeding 30–50 birds, with groups of 5 to 15 being the norm.

Although Russell (2002) summarized circumstantial evidence and previous speculation that Pacific Loons migrate directly overland from the Pacific coast flyway to the Canadian arctic, he was clear that there was no direct evidence of such overland routes. And Palmer (1962) and McLaren et al. (1977) wrote that the phenology of spring migration suggests that some loons undertake considerable overland flights in the high arctic, bypassing coastal routes around the perimeter of Alaska. This Hodder Lake observation and sporadic reports of small numbers of loons from interior British Columbia and southern Yukon confirm the existence of significant northbound overland spring movements and aggregations across western Canada, at least occasionally. That this concentration was so large was likely caused by local weather and geography.

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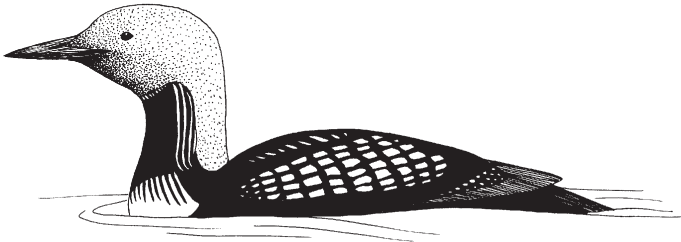
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Pacific Loon

Sketch by George C. West