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First Record of a Pacific Loon from North Carolina

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On 15 May 1987, John Fussell, Keith Archibald, Larry Crawford and I observed a small loon swimming near a Common Loon (*Gavia immer*), both about 100 m off Cape Hatteras Point, near Buxton, Dare County, N.C. After examination through a 50 X Questar, I identified the bird as a "black-throated" type loon (either Arctic Loon, *G. arctica* or Pacific Loon, *G. pacifica*). We studied the bird through a variety of scopes from 1045 h to 1115 h when we were joined by Ricky Davis, Harry LeGrand and Mark Oberle. All seven of us watched the loon until 1245 h when it took off, circled once and flew away to the north.

Compared with several Common Loons in the vicinity, the bird was notably smaller, the head was more rounded and it had a smaller, more dagger-like bill which was straight (Fig. 1). The bird was molting into breeding plumage. The nape and rear half of the crown were pale blond grading to much darker on the cheek and sides of the neck (Fig. 2). The sides of the neck from the level of the malar area to the waterline were finely striped in black and white. The chin and foreneck were entirely white except for a narrow chinstrap of brownish feathers. The scapulars were blackish with several rows of square, white spots. The flanks were uniformly dark to the waterline.



Figure 1. Pacific Loon off Cape Hatteras, Dare County on 15 May 1987. Note the small, straight bill, checkered scapulars and dark flanks (area at waterline in front of the tail; the white flank of *G. a. arctica* or *G. a. viridigularis* in this photograph would appear as a white dome about the same size as the scapular spots). Photo by Mark Oberle.



Figure 2. Photo of Pacific Loon off Cape Hatteras showing the pale nape, straight, slender bill and white-checkered scapulars. Photo by Mark Oberle.

Until the recent taxonomic decision to split the "Arctic" loons into two species (American Ornithologists' Union, 1985), differentiation from Common and Red-throated (*G. stellata*) loons was relatively simple. The combination of small size, checkered back and small, straight bill alone would be sufficient. However, separation of Pacific Loon (North America) from either of the two races of Arctic Loon (*G. a. arctica* of Europe and *G. a. viridigularis* of Asia and NW Alaska) is more difficult. Harrison (1983, 1987) and Appleby, Madge and Mullarney (1986) indicated that the Arctic Loon (both subspecies) is separable from the Pacific Loon by the presence of a prominent white flank patch. Paul Lehman (pers. comm.) noted that the presence of a chin strap and thin line separating the undertail coverts from the belly ("cloacal band") are indicative of Pacific Loon. The Asian form (*viridigularis*) is larger than the others and has a green structural color in the throat in breeding plumage while *pacifica* and *arctica* have purple (Storer, 1978; Johnsgaard, 1987). Unfortunately, neither of these features were of use in identification of the present individual. Palmer (1962) noted that in 80% of Arctic Loons (*arctica*) he examined, the breeding plumaged nape color was notably darker than that of Pacific. This distinction is further supported by Cramp and Simmons (1977), Harrison (1983, 1987), and Lehman (pers. comm.).

All of the field marks seen on the loon at Cape Hatteras indicate Pacific Loon and collectively eliminate both forms of Arctic. First, the bird clearly had dark flanks. The brownish-black color on the sides of the body extended from the lower edge of the wing to the waterline all the way from the chest to the undertail coverts (Fig. 2). Second, the nape was notably pale, being comparable to the paler naped Pacific Loons I have seen elsewhere. Several weeks later, LeGrand and Davis (pers. comm.) examined a large number of Pacific Loons in Oregon and confirmed that the nape color of the Cape Hatteras bird was similar to that of the Pacific Loons they saw. The color and lightness were comparable to the Pacific Loon photographed in Farrand (1983) and clearly not like the paintings of Arctic Loon illustrated in Heinzel, Fitter and Parslow (1974) and Cramp and Simmons (1977). Finally, the bird exhibited the dark chinstrap that is characteristic of *pacifica*.

Lehman (pers. comm.) has further noted that all of the recent sightings (and specimens) from the east coast are of Pacific Loon and that a report of Arctic Loon from North Carolina would constitute a first western hemisphere record outside arctic northwest North America. Bent (1919) stated that all the specimens from eastern North America he examined were of *pacifica* and indicated that *arctica* was unknown from the western hemisphere.

There is a single previous report of "Arctic Loon" (referring to the name used prior to taxonomic separation) from North Carolina (Am. Birds 28:626-628). However, because this sighting was reported without documentation, the absence of a description, particularly in light of the taxonomic separation, causes this report to be of limited use. Therefore, although "Arctic" (=Pacific) Loon is listed under Provisional II status on the Checklist of North Carolina Birds (Lee, 1984), the current Cape Hatteras sighting constitutes a

first detailed record of Pacific Loon (*G. pacifica*) from North Carolina. There are only two other reports of "Arctic" Loon from the area, one from Virginia (Amer. Birds 30:823) and one from Georgia (Aud. Field Notes 17:317). As with the previous North Carolina report, both these reports lacked descriptions and were listed as "probables". However, there are at least five records of *pacifica* from Florida (Aud. Field Notes/Amer. Birds regional reports, L. Alexander, pers. comm.).

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