

Yellow billed Loon 1 - 1994
Pacific Loon 2 - 1994

TO:

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OBSERVATION: three species of loon (common, yellow-billed, and Pacific) seen on 10 February 1994, Warm Creek Bay, Lake Powell, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area. All seen within same general area and all observable at same time from deck of boat.

OBSERVERS PRESENT: John Spence, Clive Pinnock (National Park Service), Charles LaRue (Peabody Coal Company). We had good previous experience with Pacific and common loon, but the yellow-billed was a new bird for all of us.

WEATHER AND HABITAT: clear, sunny, calm and warm, in shallow back water areas at head of Warm Creek Bay, lower part of Lake Powell. Water was reasonably clear, and estimated depth was 5-50 feet depending on spot. Dense drowned tamarisk and marshland vegetation occurred within 100 m of the sightings, and probably provide good nursery habitat for fish species.

SPECIES 1: Yellow-billed Loon (Gavia adamsii). We observed one individual in very close association with a common loon (cl). The two birds were swimming together, generally about 10 feet apart. The cl was doing most of the "following" (of the ybl). When they flew off (about 30 minutes later) the two birds flew closely together. All three of us agreed that the two birds seemed to be sticking together. The yellow-billed loon (ybl) was about 10-15% larger, and had a noticeably thicker neck and larger bill. Unlike the cl, it almost always had its bill tilted upward at about 20-30° above the horizon. The cl held its bill in a more or less flat plane horizontal to the water surface. The back of the neck of the ybl was pale whitish, with only a faint coloration of brown, giving the bird a strongly white-necked look from the side. By comparison, the neck of the cl was dark at the back and had a "blotchy" or patchy dark and pale look on the side. We observed the bill of the ybl from fairly close range (<100 feet) with a 20-60 X 77 mm Kowa, and several times noted that the culmen was yellow to nearly the base, where some dark could be seen. The cl, in contrast had a distinctly darker (black or dark gray) culmen. The yellow of the culmen on the ybl could occasionally be seen when sunlight flashed off the bill, even without binoculars or spotting scope. Another obvious difference between the two birds was in bill shape. The bill of the ybl had an upturned look due to the lower mandible angling fairly sharply upward to the point. The upper mandible was more or less straight to the point. The cl had a bill which could be described as consisting of two mandibles that looked like mirror images of each other; they were the same curvature and more or less straight to near the point. Finally, we observed also a faint dark spot, more or less circular, on the side of the head of the ybl, behind the eye. This spot was ~~some~~ faint.

All of these observations were greatly aided by the cooperation of the birds, as they stayed so closely together that we often got excellent looks of both in the same field of view in the spotting scope.

SPECIES 2: Pacific Loon (Gavia pacifica). While Pinnock and LaRue were studying the ybl to port, Spence observed a different smaller loon ahead of and starboard of the boat, ca. 50 feet away. Through the spotting scope the bird showed a small straight grayish bill, sharply and cleanly demarcated (tricolored) neck, with white front, black midline, fading to dark brown towards the rear. It was

noticeably smaller than the other two species. LaRue and Pinnock, who both had previous experience with this species, immediately identified it as a Pacific Loon.

SPECIES 3: Common Loon (Gavia immer). In addition to the bird associated with the yellow-billed loon, we saw either 3 or 4 more individuals, all of which were identified as common loons. All had the classic common loon winter look, with the large straight pale gray bill and blotchy neck.

SIGNIFICANCE: the second report of yellow-billed loon for Utah, perhaps the first time all three have been seen simultaneously in the west (at least in Utah)? Also, there are few previous reports of Pacific Loons in Utah. This finding suggests that Lake Powell should be searched more often. We looked at one small part of Lake Powell, and certainly less than 1% of its surface area. Many additional suitable bays could harbor loons. These include Last Chance, Dry Rock, Padre, Hall's, Bullfrog, Good Hope bays, the Rincon, and several areas along the San Juan Arm of the lake.

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