









PACIFIC LOON
(*Gavia pacifica*)

002A-01-1992

At 10:45 AM on Nov. 25, 1992 I was scanning Presque Isle Bay south of Big Pond when I saw a loon on the water perhaps $3/4$ of a mile away. The loon seemed to show a sharp demarcation between the white front of the neck and the dark back of the neck, which is not typical of Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) or Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*). Deuane Hoffman was with me, and I suggested that we study this bird and wait for it to come closer to shore. Within 15 minutes the loon swam much closer to us and we could occasionally see it with Red-breasted Merganser (*Mergus serrator*). The loon appeared to be only slightly larger than the merganser. Moments later a Common Loon moved into the same field of view and showed itself to be obviously larger than the loon in question. At this point we felt that we were observing an Arctic/Pacific Loon.

At approximately 11:15 AM the Arctic/Pacific Loon was within easy identification range, 150 to 200 yards away. I made approx. 100 photographic exposures of the loon by itself and with Common Loons and Red-breasted Mergansers.

The Arctic/Pacific Loon actively fed and would frequently dive and stay submerged for a relatively long time before surfacing 100 or more feet away from where it had originally dived. The bird would submerge its head often pumping its head back and forth before diving. A feeding behavior that we also observed in Red-breasted Merganser. I never saw the Arctic/Pacific Loon with a fish in its mouth after surfacing as the Common Loons frequently did.

The following characteristics were noted by me:

- 1) The bill was small, possibly $2/3$, but less than equal the length of the head.
- 2) The bill was straight and held horizontally.
- 3) The bill was medium gray with a dark culmen and had a dusky tip.
- 4) The crown and nape were grayish-brown being palest on the nape.
- 5) The grayish-brown crown extended down the face and below the eye. It formed a straight line extending from the base of the culmen around the cheek and to a point where the neck joins the base of the head and continued down the side of the neck in an unbroken straight line following the contour of the neck. Darkest areas were the forehead, the base of the back of the neck which extended up the side of the neck as a narrow dark line. In good light a thin dark line could be seen beginning at the base of the back of the neck extending part way up the center of the back of the neck.
- 6) The chin, throat, and front of the neck were unmarked white which was well defined where it met the dark feathers on the face and sides of the neck.
- 7) A crease on the lower throat where the neck joins the base of the head, gave the impression of a dusky chin strap (even evident in the photographs) which disappeared when the loon stretched its neck.

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- 8) At the base of the neck fine vertical dark markings crossed over the front of the neck forming a necklace.
- 9) The front and sides of the breast were white with streaking on the sides.
- 10) The entire upperside including tail and flanks were an even dark brown.
- 11) The upper back and scapulars were heavily edged in white forming parallel rows of pale lines. At close range the scalloping effect of these marks could be seen and looked like parallel zig-zag lines.
- 12) The following day I saw the bird fly about 50 yards. The pure white underside back to and behind the legs were broken by a diagnostic dark band at the vent area that began at the base of the leg and crossed over to the base of the other leg.

I wrote the above description before I consulted any published material. Prior to the sighting I had had no experience with Arctic/Pacific Loons. After writing the description, I began to study the published material. The results were that I was able to determine the age of the bird and probably its species. The age was determined to be juvenile. In Advanced Birding, juveniles are described as having prominent pale edges to the feathers of the upper back and scapulars. Adults in basic plumage have all dark backs with only faint paler edges to the feathers. In a paper written in Birding on Pacific versus Arctic Loons of 12 randomly selected non-alternate plumaged *G. pacifica* at the American Museum, 4 of the 12 were juveniles. 2 had complete, but faint chin straps and 2 lacked a chin strap. Pacifica specimens at the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology indicate that 80% showed an obvious chin strap, but the review did not correlate this character with age. Occasionally a chin strap was found on arctica of both races, though it was rarely complete. 2 juveniles from the race *G. a. viridigularis* from M.V.Z., showed partial straps. This suggests that birds with complete chin straps are likely to be *G. pacifica* where as a partial or absence of chin strap could be either *G. pacifica* or *G. arctica*. The paper suggests that of even greater importance may be the presence of a vent strap (sometimes partial) on all *G. pacifica*. However, on 5 of 12 birds examined of the nominate *G. arctica* from the American Museum there was a faint complete vent strap. All of these birds with faint vent straps were juveniles. The paper also suggests that adult *G. pacifica* can have a prominent complete chin and vent strap where as *G. arctica* of both races do not have both chin and vent straps complete. Juveniles have been found to be highly variable in both species and races as to the amount or lack of chin and vent straps. From this information it seems unlikely that the Presque Isle loon can be identified to species because of the lack of a chin strap or the presence of a vent strap.

Kenn Kaufman says in Advanced Birding the Arctic is a larger bird than the Pacific, with almost no overlap and should stand out as being 10% larger when both birds are together. Difference in bill size is greater, so Arctics should look proportionately large-billed. This note may be of little value since the loon seen at Presque Isle was only seen with Common Loon and Red-breasted Merganser. However, the smaller size of this bird was evident when compared with the other 2 species. Noticeably smaller than the Common

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Loon and only slightly larger than the Red-breasted Merganser. When the loon was next to a merganser the bill of the loon could clearly be seen as being shorter than the mergansers, but thicker at the base. Kenn also mentions the presence of a white flank patch in Arctic Loon, which he says is usually absent on Pacific Loon.

From the information above, the loon on Presque Isle seems most likely to be a Pacific. The presence of a bold, dark, unbroken vent strap, small bill, lack of flank patch, and the fact that the Arctic Loon is extremely unlikely to be seen over most of North America gives strong credence to the sighting as being a *G. pacifica* rather than *G. arctica*.

More work needs to be done on separating Arctic/Pacific type Loons in basic plumage particularly juveniles in order to establish concrete field identification characteristics, if possible,

The loon remained in the general vicinity where I discovered it for several days and was seen by many. I spent approx. 8 hrs. over the course of 4 days studying the loon. I used a 10 X 40 Zeiss Binocular and a TSN-4 Kowa Spotting Scope to observe the bird. Unfortunately the sun never shone, so it was difficult to get good photographs under the heavy cloud cover that prevailed every day.

Literature cited:

Kaufman, K. 1990. Advanced Birding, Peterson Field Guide Series. Houghton Mifflin Company pp. 20-29

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References:

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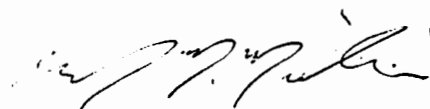
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Gerald M. McWilliams



Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 1 of

Species: Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*)

Date of Sighting: 25 November 1992

Location: PRESQUE ISLE SP

County: ERIE

Observer(s): Jerry McWilliams; Dave Darney; Frank Haas

Date of Submission: 1992

Submitted by: Jerry McWilliams; Dave Darney; Frank Haas

Written Description: YES Photo: YES Specimen: NO

Recording: NONE

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V			Abstain
					A	B	C	
F. Haas	X							
N. Pulcinella	X							
E. Kwater	X							
R. Ickes	X							
G. McWilliams	X							
P. Schwalbe	X							
J. Skinner	X							
TOTALS	7							
DECISION	X							

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

F. C. Haas

Date:

3-31-95

Record No.: 002a-01-1992

Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

Voting Tabulation - Round # 2 of 2

Species: **Pacific Loon**

Date of Sighting: **25 November 1992**

Observer(s): **Jerry McWilliams, Dave Darney, Frank Haas**

Date of Submission: **1992**

Submitted by: **Jerry McWilliams, Dave Darney, Frank Haas**

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV	Class V		
					A	B	C
E. Kwater	X						
B. Haas	X						
F. Haas	X						
R. Ickes	X						
G. McWilliams	X		<i>JM</i>				
S. Santner				X			
J. Skinner				X			
TOTALS	5			2			
DECISION							

Comments:

Signature (Secretary):

F. C. Haas

Date:

11/14/93