

PENNSYLVANIA ORNITHOLOGICAL RECORDS COMMITTEE  
210 Welcome Ave. Norwood, PA 19074

28 January 2002

Mr. Robert M. Schutsky  
115 Peach Bottom Village  
Peach Bottom, PA 17563-9716

Dear Bob,

Thank you for submitting documentation on the Pacific Loon at Conowingo Pond on 3 October through 11 November 1997. After careful review, the Committee has voted not to accept this record.

Because of differing views among the members, balloting went two full rounds before a decision (which is why the result was delayed). Ultimately two members favored acceptance and five voted against it.

Those voting against acceptance placed the record in Class IV-A as "a record for which there exists a majority of evidence in support of the observer's identification; the record is probably correct, but not beyond reasonable doubt." These members' general view was that more details at closer range (of course no fault of yours) would have been advisable for acceptance of such a rarity.

As you are aware, non-acceptance does not imply that the bird was not a Pacific Loon, but simply that the Committee believes the circumstances of the sighting were not sufficient to support the identification conclusively.

We know that this will not discourage you from submitting reports on any future rarities you find, and we appreciate your excellent documentation in this case.

Sincerely,



For the Committee:  
Paul Hess, Chairman

Record No. 002a-01-1997

002A-01-1997

RARE BIRD REPORT

To: PORC

Nick Pulcinella

Barb and Frank Haas

cc: Rick Blom

From: Robert M. Schutsky

Species: **Pacific Loon**, probable winter adult

Number observed: one (1)

Sighting dates: 30 October 1997 through at least 11 November 1997. (I departed for TX on 12 Nov and heard of no subsequent sightings, except perhaps Harvey Mudd in the MD portion of the river.)

Sighting time: 0915hr, off and on until noon (on 30 Oct.)

Location: Susquehanna River (Conowingo Pond), Lancaster County, PA in open water immediately below and east of the Peach Bottom Atomic Power Station, downriver to 1 mile above the Mason-Dixon Line. I was scoping from the Lancaster County shoreline along the railroad tracks, 0.4 miles below the RR crossing at Peach Bottom Village, near my home. Sightings on subsequent days ranged from this point downriver to the PA-MD border. In addition the bird was seen on 2-3 different occasions in MD waters, for a *first MD state record* (fide Rick Blom).

Habitat: open, slow moving river, much more like a lake due to the impoundment created by Conowingo Dam which is 6-7 miles downriver from the point of the original observation.

Sighting conditions: Excellent early in the observation period, then deteriorated a bit later in the morning. At first the skies were clear, river perfectly calm, sun coming from the left and behind me. As the morning progressed the bird was more and more in poor light, i.e. into the sun. I was using a Kowa TSN-4 20-60X spotting scope. My Zeiss 10X40 binoculars were of little value because of the distance involved. Ed Pederson was using a Kowa scope, perhaps 30X(?).

General description: Other than the masses of Ring-billed Gulls that were present, this was one of the first birds that I noticed. I had the feeling of a small dark loon, but figured that my perspective was off and that it was just a Common Loon, perhaps on the small side. Thoughts of grebe crossed my mind, but no grebe species fit what I was seeing. I also considered an alcid, a comment that Rick Blom made to me when he found the same bird in MD waters a few days later. But as with the grebe, no alcid really fit what I was seeing. As I continued scoping I came across a Common Loon and realized that the first bird was very small and dark. It was very near to the size of Ring-billed Gulls that were perched on the water in direct comparison to it. So I moved the scope back to the first bird and began to formulate the idea that I was looking at a Pacific/Arctic Loon. As I scoped in the other direction I found a Red-throated Loon not too far away, allowing me to go back and forth between the two. For 1-2 minutes both birds were within the same field of view, allowing direct comparisons of size, shape, and plumage. At this point I was convinced that I had a Pacific/Arctic Loon. I jumped in the van and returned to my house where I called Ed and Jo Pederson who I knew would call many other birders. I also put out an e-mail alert to birders in PA, MD, and DE.

Detailed description: After comparing the bird to nearby Common Loon, Red-throated Loon, and Horned Grebe, I decided that I was looking at a small loon, smaller than Common, almost identical in size to Red-throated, and considerably larger than Horned Grebe. I concentrated on the comparison with the cooperative Red-throated Loon. The two birds were essentially the same size; if anything I felt that the Pacific/Arctic was just a tiny bit larger, but not much. The bills were roughly the same length, but the Pacific/Arctic gave a very

straight-billed appearance in comparison to the upturned look of the Red-throated. The Pacific/Arctic had much more contrasting plumage, appearing very dark, basically black, above and pure white below; there was no gray-headed look that is so helpful in identifying Red-throated Loon in winter plumage. There was never any hint of light feather edging on the bird's back, indicating that it was probably an adult Pacific/Arctic Loon. I was never able to see either a chin strap or vent strap: either they were not present or the distance was too great to pick up these field marks. I would vote for the distance theory, as the river is nearly a mile wide at this location and the bird was typically 1/2-2/3 of the way across the river. The distance may have also precluded my seeing any light feathering on the bird's back, but it appeared very dark at all times, so I feel quite certain that it was an adult.

Behavior: The Pacific/Arctic Loon was feeding almost constantly for the several hours of the initial observation. It stayed underwater for a relatively short time on each dive (15-20 seconds), then surfaced for a very short time, usually only several seconds. Every now and then it remained surfaced for a longer period, especially if it was swallowing a fish. On several occasions it appeared to snorkel instead of coming fully to the surface, much like a Pied-billed Grebe will sometimes do. It seemed to show a subtle difference in the way it dove in comparison to the other loons. Instead of just slipping beneath the water it did a bit of a forward plunge. This was nothing big, but it did seem distinctive. At times it associated with a Red-throated Loon; it never seemed to associate with the more numerous Common Loons or with any other species. I never saw the bird in flight.

Experience with other species: Up until this time I had not opened a field guide. I have seen about 5 Pacific Loons on the East Coast, all in winter plumage, including the first PA record at Presque Isle in Nov 1992. I have seen about 50 Pacifics on the West Coast. I have been birding for 25 years, so have seen 1000's of Common Loons and at least 1000 Red-throated Loons. Yellow-billed Loon was never an issue because of the bird's small size. This left the Arctic Loon to be considered, for which I had no prior experience. I had to turn to other birders, books, and the article in Birding from April(?)1997. All of these sources stressed the white flank patch on the Arctic, which this bird definitely did not show: it was dark to the water line. Rick Blom mentioned just a hint of gray near the water line, but only when seen at relatively close range. The bird in question also had a very rounded head, unlike the rather blocky look that an Arctic should show. Ed Pederson was the first observer to eliminate Arctic based on these characteristics. Everyone else that I spoke with concurred.

Vocalizations: none heard.

Photos: Unfortunately the Pacific Loon was never close enough for me to attempt a photo. I did not hear of any photos being taken in PA. Rick Blom would know if the bird was photographed in MD.

Initial sighting and report by: Robert M. Schutsky, Bird Treks, 115 Peach Bottom Village, Peach Bottom, PA 17563-9716. Phone: 717-548-3303, fax: 717-548-3327, e-mail: [birdtrek@epix.net](mailto:birdtrek@epix.net). Report written 19 November 1997 from field notes written the day of the observation, prior to opening a field guide. I did, as mentioned, consult a number of sources to learn about the subtleties of Arctic Loon, which is how I made the final determination that it was a Pacific Loon. I believe this would constitute the third PA record, if accepted by PORC.

Additional reports: I do not know of anyone who is filing a separate report for PA, although Ed Pederson and Charles Alexander both saw the bird well on 30 October. I would assume that reports are being filed in MD to document a first state record. On the days that the bird was seen in MD, I heard of no sightings in PA, and vice versa. There were no sightings in both states on the same day. This added credence to all of the sightings: people were not jumping to conclusions and misidentifying another loon as the Pacific. It was apparently moving up and down the river, above and below the PA-MD border.

**Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee**

**Voting Tabulation - Round One**

Species: Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*)

Date of Sighting: 10 October 1997 to 11 November 1997

Location: PEACH BOTTOM

County: LANCASTER

Observer(s): Bob Schutsky

Date of Submission: 1997

Submitted by: Bob Schutsky

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

Specimen: No

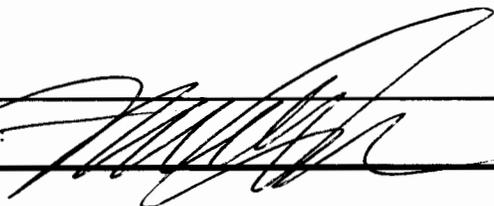
Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
D. Couchman			X					
T. Floyd								X
P. Hess					X			
R. Ickes								X
J. McWilliams				X				
B. Reid				X				
P. Rodewald		X						
TOTALS		1	1	2	1			2
DECISION								

Comments: (2)(3)(2)

2ND ROUND

Signature (Secretary):



Date: 9/18/00

## Pennsylvania Ornithological Records Committee

### Tabulation Form - Round Two

Species: Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*)

Date of Sighting: 10 October 1997 to 10 October 1997

Location: PEACH BOTTOM

County: LANCASTER

Observer(s): Bob Schutsky

Date of Submission: 1997

Submitted by: Bob Schutsky

Written Description: Yes

Photo: No

Specimen: No

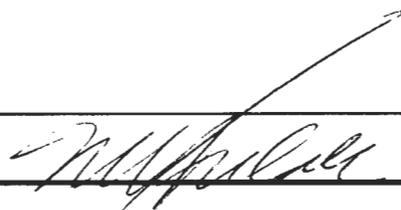
Recording: No

Member	Class I	Class II	Class III	Class IV-A				Abstain
					Class IV-B	Class IV-C	Class V	
D. Couchman				X				
G. Armistead				X				
P. Hess				X				
R. Ickes			X					
J. McWilliams				X				
B. Reid				X				
P. Rodewald			X					
TOTALS			2	5				
DECISION			2	X				

**Comments:**

2/5/0

Signature (Secretary):



Date:

10/21/01