

SPRING MIGRATION OF THE COMMON LOON THROUGH SULLIVAN COUNTY, NEW YORK

KARL E. PARKER¹ and MICHAEL P. MILLIGAN²

Although the Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) has been the focus of increasing interest in recent years, most research on this species has taken place on the breeding grounds. The recent die-off of loons along the Florida coast (Lange and Stroud 1983) has demonstrated the importance of information concerning loon wintering areas and migration, since loons may be particularly vulnerable during these periods. The following observations are submitted to contribute to an understanding of Common Loon migration in general and of loon movements through New York in particular.

Observations of migrating loons were made on 14 April 1985, a relatively calm, overcast day with precipitation in the form of light drizzle. At 0950 hours Common Loons were observed flying north, coming over the dam of Cliff Lake, a 67.4 ha lake located at an elevation of 326 m in the town of Lumberland, Sullivan County. Loons had been heard tremoloing several times earlier that morning. At 1000 hours, a dozen loons flew over Cliff Lake heading north. Minutes later a group of approximately 40 loons followed. A second group of a dozen loons, also heading north, flew over at 1015 hours. An occasional single bird passed over between flocks. Williams (1973) reported that in Florida loons migrating north from the Gulf usually were grouped in two to six loosely associated flocks of two to 15 birds. More recently, Kerlinger (1982) found the average flock size of loons migrating through Albany County, New York, was 1.39 individuals per group. This average includes both spring and fall migrants, however.

Between 1145 and 1445 hours, loons were observed at Lebanon Lake, a 116.6 ha lake located 2 km southwest of Cliff Lake. It was here that the behavior of the loons was most unusual. On several occasions, over 50 loons were flying simultaneously, circling the lake. The loons did not follow any single flight path, such as flocks of ducks or geese often do, but instead were flying in every direction. The loons frequently tremoloed while in flight.

Some loons were present on Lebanon Lake the following day but none was observed during a visit to the area 18 April to 22 April. The previous year (20 April 1984), individual migrating loons were observed in the same area but neither large flocks nor the unusual flying behavior were observed.

The loon flocks observed at both Cliff and Lebanon Lakes were loose

and unorganized, with no apparent leader. The loons at Lebanon Lake may have been disoriented by the fog, rain, or other climatological factors. It is possible, however, that the behavior served to stimulate or maintain flock cohesiveness and readiness for flight. The senior author has observed similar behavior on a clear, mid-summer morning at a 153 ha Adirondack lake that was used by feeding but not by nesting loons. In that instance, the six adults present had spent the morning feeding at the lake. Without warning one loon took flight, then another, then a pair, until all six were circling and criss-crossing the lake, several tremoloing in flight. After several minutes of flight, the loons headed off in different directions, apparently flying to other nearby lakes.

Although no estimate was made of the altitude at which the loons migrating over Cliff Lake were flying, it is probable that they were quite low, since they were easily observed under conditions of rain and fog. The low altitude could be attributed to the weather, or the loons recently may have taken off from another lake. Loons migrating through Florida (elevation not given but probably close to 0 m) at an estimated altitude of 500 m were not very conspicuous (Williams 1973). Kerlinger (1982) found that loons migrating through eastern New York normally flew between 1500 and 2700 m (above sea level). At those altitudes loons generally were not visible without the aid of binoculars and radar.

A number of possible explanations exist for the large number of loons seen. The weather may have made conditions temporarily unsuitable for migration, resulting in a "pile-up" that was beginning to disperse at the time of the observations. However, it is possible that this area, which has a large number of lakes similar in size and elevation to those used by loons in the Adirondacks, regularly receives a large pulse of migrants moving through in a brief period of time. Arbib (1963) indicated a major northerly migration flight of loons passes through this region of Sullivan County.

Considering that the New York loon population is estimated to contain a minimum of 800 to 1000 adults (Parker *et al.* 1986), the presence of upwards of 100 loons in this area points out the importance of the region for loons during spring migration. Flying at a ground speed between 100 and 160 kmph (60 mph, Bent 1919; 44.6 meters/sec. Kerlinger 1982), loons are probably capable of migrating 1100 km or more in a day (Williams 1973), and thus could easily move from coastal sites to Lake Ontario, the St. Lawrence River, or the Adirondacks. The ultimate destination of these birds is unknown, however. It is possible that these loons were Canadian birds headed towards northern lakes that experience ice-out later than Adirondack lakes (Arbib 1963). However, the date of the observations does not rule out the possibility that these

birds were headed for the Adirondacks, where some birds do not arrive on breeding lakes there until mid- to late April. Regardless of the flight terminus, this region of lakes may provide an important stopover for feeding and resting, particularly when the weather is unsuitable for migration.

Acknowledgments

This note is based on unpublished data contained in Nongame Unit files. Observations were made by M. Milligan.

Literature Cited

- Arbib, R. 1963. The Common Loon in New York State. *Kingbird* 13: 132-140.
- Bent, R. 1919. Life Histories of North American Diving Birds. *U.S. Natl. Mus. Bull.* 107: 55-56.
- Kerlinger, P. 1982. The migration of Common Loons through eastern New York. *Condor* 84: 97-100.
- Lange, R. E., Jr. and R. K. Stroud. 1983. Investigations on Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) mortality in the southeastern United States: January-June 1983. Preliminary report. U.S. Fish and Wildl. Serv., Madison, WI. 15 pp.
- Parker, K. E., R. L. Miller, and S. Isil. 1986. Status of the Common Loon in New York State. NYS Dept. Envir. Conserv., Delmar, NY. 50 pp.
- Williams, L. E., Jr. 1973. Spring migration of Common Loons from the Gulf of Mexico. *Wilson Bull.* 85: 230.

¹New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Nongame Unit, Wildlife Resources Center, Delmar, NY 12054

²R.R. 1, Box 115, Port Leyden, NY 13433