

THE MIGRATION OF RED-THROATED LOON ON LAKE ONTARIO

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The status of the Red-throated Loon is something of an anomaly in the Buffalo Ornithological Society (B.O.S.) region, which stretches on Lake Ontario from Point Breeze in Orleans County east to Grimsby Beach, Ontario, a length of 107 miles. It includes all of the Lake Ontario shoreline in Region 1 as well as the adjacent Niagara peninsula of Ontario. Beardslee and Mitchell (1965:85) call Red-throated Loon an uncommon transient visitant that is most frequently recorded from Lake Ontario, where it is sometimes common in April. The highest counts they give are 125 off Lakeside Beach State Park on 25 April 1954 by B. Nathan *et al*, and 13 on the April Count on 6 April 1953. Since then, this species has seldom been recorded on B.O.S. Counts, with maxima of 13 on 20 May 1990 (B.O.S., 1990) and four on 15 May 1977 (B.O.S., 1977). A review of "Noteworthy Records" in *The Prothonotary*, newsletter of the B.O.S., since 1965 reveals only seven records of more than two individuals. The highest counts were six on the Allegheny Reservoir on 17 May 1970 by R. Sundell (B.O.S., 1971) and five at Olcott on Lake Ontario on 23 November 1975 by D. Freeland (B.O.S., 1975).

On Thursday, 11 November 1993 Betsy Potter and I observed a large migratory flight of Red-throated Loon over Lake Ontario. From 7:30 AM to 12:30 PM I counted 223 Red-throated Loon from the foot of Quaker Road and from the cliff at Golden Hill State Park, both in the Town of Somerset in Niagara County. At about 1:45 PM I counted four more off Shadigee in the Town of Yates in Orleans County. Nearly all of the loons were flying west, low over the water, and beyond a mile from shore. On Sunday, 14 November, I recorded 181 Red-throated Loon from the same locations. Although the flight seemed stronger on Sunday, less time spent counting and poor visibility due to rain contributed to a smaller total. Our one day count of 227 Red-throated Loon is the highest ever recorded in the current B.O.S. study area. Not only are these maxima for the B.O.S. study area, they surpass all other significant counts by an order of magnitude!

What is intriguing about our observations, however, is that they may not be unusual. Bull (1985:52) and quarterly reports in *The Kingbird* since summer 1984 indicate that this species has occurred in much larger numbers off eastern Orleans and Monroe Counties, outside the

B.O.S. study area but less than 50 miles east of where we made our observations. Bull gives a record of 500 off Webster Park in Monroe County on 14 April 1952 by Kemnitzer. Region 2 reports include a count of 1008 at Hamlin Beach State Park on 28 November 1986 (Griffith, 1987) and an extraordinary total of over 2000 on 31 October 1989 by W. Listman (Griffith, 1990). These two counts were made within eleven miles of Point Breeze, the eastern boundary of the B.O.S. study area. The only other reports that I have found which are higher than 227 come from Brett Ewald (pers. comm.). Brett had been conducting a daily water bird count in the autumn of 1993 at Hamlin Beach State Park. On 10 November 1993 his count for this species was over 1200. A few days later the Hamlin watch recorded 1390! It was Ewald's telephone report on the evening of 10 November which alerted me to the possibility of seeing a large number of Red-throated Loon in the B.O.S. region. My high count occurred the next day. While large flights of Red-throated Loon may not occur annually, they may occur more frequently than have been recorded in the B.O.S. area.

The status of Red-throated Loon statewide and, in particular, along the New York side of Lake Ontario is interesting. Bull (1985) calls it a "common to locally abundant migrant on Lake Ontario and on the ocean. Highly variable in numbers, though scarce at times. Usually rare on the smaller lakes." This seems to agree with its status in Region 2 (Genesee Ornith. Soc., 1985), where it is a "regular, common to very common (sometimes abundant) spring and fall transient." However, records from *Kingbird* Regions 5 and 6, located at the southeast and east ends of Lake Ontario, respectively, indicate that the maximum count in those areas is only 16, recorded on 6 November 1984 at Derby Hill in Oswego County. Records show that in the B.O.S. study area the Red-throated Loon is a rare to uncommon migrant, though occasionally very common. Although Beardslee and Mitchell (1965) indicate that the species may be common in April, it appears that the largest numbers occur in the autumn. In Region 2, the species is uncommon to abundant. In Region 5 it is rare to uncommon, and it is rare in Region 6.

In an attempt to explain why is this species apparently so much more numerous in the Rochester Region, I list the following as possible contributing factors:

- 1) the Red-throated Loon migrates closer to shore in Region 2.
- 2) Region 2 has better observation points, which project further out into Lake Ontario.
- 3) Region 2 observers spend more time observing on Lake Ontario than elsewhere.

I believe that the distance at which these loons migrate off shore has much to do with the paucity of records of large numbers in the B.O.S. region. My observations on 11 and 14 November 1993 made it apparent that the Red-throated Loon flew further out than did the Common Loon. At our first observation point at Quaker Road on 11 November, it took me several minutes to find the "flight line" of the Red-throated Loon. It was necessary to use a telescope in order to keep finding the birds. The few individuals that we saw in the water were also further out than were the Common Loon. Brett Ewald (pers. comm.) has told me that he too has observed this phenomenon. If this is consistent, it could mean that this species is often missed because it flies so far offshore.

If for some reason Red-throated Loon migrates closer to shore in Region 2 than in B.O.S. Region, this could help explain why the Rochester area records so many more than the neighboring Regions. The orientation of the shoreline may be important for the same reason that Braddock Bay records many more raptors along Lake Ontario than does the B.O.S. region. The shoreline of Lake Ontario generally runs east-west the B.O.S. region, but starts to dip southeasterly at Hamlin Beach State Park in Region 2 and continues to do so to Irondequoit Bay. In the spring raptors which are flying east hit Lake Ontario west of Braddock Bay and are funneled by the shoreline and become more concentrated over the hawk watch since hawks are reluctant to fly over water. Similarly the loons, which are headed west and are reluctant to fly near land, are more concentrated at points west of Irondequoit Bay. Hamlin Beach State Park juts out slightly into the lake, which helps to get the observer even closer to these birds. This combination may help make this site an excellent location for recording the loon migration.

It is also likely that Rochester birders spend more time checking Lake Ontario than do birders in the B.O.S. region. Rochester is located on the lake and there is a relatively large area of park land along the shore. It is only natural that the birders there would be drawn to the lake. On the other hand, Buffalo is 30 miles from Lake Ontario and birders there are more likely to visit the north shore of Lake Erie, the Niagara River, or Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge. Observer effort may be the most important factor to explain the apparent difference in abundance of the Red-throated Loon in the two Regions. Indeed, while the first two reasons listed may be important, they do not explain the record of 500 at Webster Park cited by Bull (1965). Webster is at a location where westward flying loons should be further offshore because of the orientation of the shoreline.

Why are the loons migrating west? Very few loons winter on the Great Lakes, but they are numerous at that time on both coasts of North America. Where are they going? Since they are headed west, this would imply that the largest numbers may be in the Ontario sector of the B.O.S. region or further west near Hamilton, Ontario. William Smith (pers. comm.) counted 190 Red-throated Loon moving west at Hamilton Bay around the time I was recording large numbers. Although Red-throated Loon is rarely reported inland, the westward flying loons seen by Smith would soon reach the end of the lake. Since they were not seen returning east they probably proceeded along an overland route. Although Smith's count is significant, it is only a small percentage of the numbers seen at Hamlin Beach and it cannot be assumed that all the loons follow the same route. Still, it seems unlikely that the loons are turning around on Lake Ontario and heading east. My observations and those from Hamlin Beach indicate that nearly all loons are moving west. There are no records of significant numbers between the Town of Somerset and Hamilton. Could some possibly be turning around and migrating east further out on the lake where they cannot be seen? If so, this would seem to be a large expenditure of energy with no apparent benefits.

To answer these questions we need more records of migrating Red-throated Loon from points west of Somerset or from the north shore of Lake Ontario, including the direction of flight. Several people have told me that they do not believe they could identify a distant Red-throated Loon in flight. With experience, however, it is really not that difficult. The first step is to distinguish loons from the other migrating water birds. The difference in the speed of the wing beat can be detected even at enormous distances. Ducks flap much more quickly than loons, gulls much more slowly. The loon's distinctive shape of heavy body, long head and neck, and trailing feet can be recognized quite easily at fair distances. Cormorants are probably the birds most similar in shape to loons but they are much darker overall, appearing quite uniform. To separate the Red-throated from the Common Loon, observers should look for the Red-throated Loon's relatively smaller, slimmer head and neck and slightly faster wing beat. In the autumn another very good mark is the much whiter head and neck of the Red-throated Loon. At a great distance the head and neck of the winter plumaged Red-throated Loon tends to disappear while the head and neck of a Common Loon remains visible. Unless you have a direct comparison between the two species, absolute size can be deceiving, especially at great distances. It is much safer to use relative size and proportions, such as the Red-

throated Loon's relatively smaller head and neck mentioned above. Watching the Red-throated Loon migration over the lake is much like hawk watching when the hawks are specks in the sky. There are two very big differences, however. First, the loons are at eye level, which enables the observer to find the birds more quickly. Second, it is much easier to use a telescope on the loons, which is essential for their identification.

One location in the B.O.S. region where an observer should be able to get much closer to the flight line of the loons is at Port Weller, Ontario at the terminus of the Welland Canal. Two man-made peninsulas, one on either side of the canal, jut over a mile out into Lake Ontario. A long walk is necessary to reach the end but if one picked the right day it could prove to be fruitful. The experiences of Brett Ewald and myself this fall have shown that loons will often fly on a southwest wind. Lighter winds appear to be more favorable than strong winds. At Hamlin Beach Common Loon was recorded migrating throughout October and November with peak counts occurring around the third week of October. Red-throated Loon was first seen in mid October and were recorded throughout November, with the peak occurring during the second week of November. Rochester birders feel that the spring is less productive for loon flights and that big flight days occur less frequently and involve much smaller numbers. However, it is still possible to see a significant flights in the spring, particularly in April. The direction of flight at that time as well as the most favorable winds are still unknown to me.

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