

YELLOW-BILLED LOON IN OSWEGO HARBOR. SECOND STATE RECORD. FIRST LIVE SIGHTING!

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ABSTRACT — A first winter Yellow-billed Loon (*Gavia adamsii*) was seen on 21 December 1997 in Oswego harbor, NY. Although this is the second state record, it is the first live sighting. Circumstances surrounding the discovery are given, along with a detailed field description, and a photograph. The first NY record pertains to a bill found on Long Island in 1930.

INTRODUCTION

A first winter Yellow-billed Loon (*Gavia adamsii*) was seen on 21 December 1997 in Oswego harbor. This was the first official live sighting of this species in New York State and was only the second state record, the first being based on a specimen. Mary Alice Koenke, Sue Boettger, Bill Gruenbaum and I were counting birds along the Oswego River as part of the annual Oswego-Fulton Christmas Bird Count (CBC). While positioned beside Cahill's restaurant on the west side of the river, Sue spotted a loon four tenths of a mile downstream just within the harbor. It was approximately 0830 hours and it snowed heavily. Mary Alice, Bill, and Sue loosely debated the bird's identity, their opinions swayed between Common and Red-throated loon which struck me as odd, given that these species are generally not confused. When I looked at the bird I immediately thought it was a juvenile Common Loon but I was struck by its unusually pale appearance. I made mental note to recheck the bird once at the Marine Museum, our next stop about 0.4 mile away. Meanwhile, I was happy to conclude, as the others did, that the bird was a Common Loon.

At the museum, Sue spotted the loon again. While she and the others continued counting I was eager to observe it at closer range. The moment I had the bird in my scope the small voice at the back of my mind began to shout. The bird was indeed extremely pale and I glimpsed some yellow on the bill as it dove. I announced that it was "a really good candidate for Yellow-billed Loon". (I had previous experience with a basic adult in Ireland 1986.) With the attention of the others now on the bird, I suggested we check the exact coloration of its culmen and start taking other field-notes. At approximately that time (0900 hours) our views of the loon were blocked when a freighter docked right where we stood! It was decided at that juncture that it would be best to alert other birders about the bird.

Awaiting the arrival of others we positioned ourselves on the east side of the river at the Oswego Port Authority. It was approx. 0930 hours; snow had stopped falling and the Loon was resting just 50 m from shore in calm water.

Through 30x60 magnification the views were stunning, the bird was unequivocally a very beautiful first winter Yellow-billed Loon! See Figure 1.



Figure 1. Yellow-billed Loon. Photographed on 29 December 1997 in Oswego harbor, NY, by Tim Capone (Syracuse, NY) using a Nikon 6006 camera with a Sigma 400 mm APO lens, at 1/125 speed F5.6 exposure, on Fuji Sensa 100 ASA film. This is the same photo that appeared in Weiner 1998.

Fortunately the loon remained faithful to the harbor from 21 December till 6 January 1998. Many observers (mob) from all over NY and as far as Michigan and Washington, DC saw the bird. In fact, it had gained celebrity status as an item of regional news on television and in the newspaper (Weiner 1998). By 6 January however, severe silting from the Oswego River forced most diving birds away from the harbor. There were two subsequent sightings, 12 January and the last which was 22 January 1998 (Mary Alice and mob).

GENERAL IMPRESSION

At all times structure/size appeared most like and larger than a Common Loon. Plumage was notably pale brown, lacking sharp black and white contrasts on the head and neck. Bill was long, heavy and pale (yellow), especially toward the tip. While not actively feeding/diving it habitually held its head up tilted like a Red-throated Loon or a cormorant, as is typical for this species. At such times it also showed a large "bump" on its forehead, perhaps more pronounced than on a Common Loon. Wide whitish fringing on the scapulars enhanced the paleness of the bird, especially at close range. A whitish flank patch was often visible.

DESCRIPTION

Upper parts: bump on forehead from behind, while head up tilted, was like a huge cyst! Head and neck were washed variously brown. A wide whitish area separated the dark eye from a paler crown. A subtle dark smudge was present behind the auricular on side of head. Hind neck was patterned with buffish areas each side of the nape and by darker line in the middle that connected the crown to the brown collar at base of the neck. Mantle was grayish-brown, closely striped with buffish-gray feather fringes. Scapulars were brown showing wide buffish-gray fringes that formed a distinct pattern of bold wavy lines across the "back". Primaries, rump, and tail were darker brown than the rest of the upper parts.

Under parts: cheeks, chin, throat and foreneck buff-white blended with upper parts. Thin dark mustachial stripe ran across the cheeks from the bill. Feathering on face at lower mandible was dark brown. (Shadow on the chin and throat could result in an appearance further suggesting a juvenile Red-throated Loon when distant.) Lower neck and breast were pure white. Neat brownish-gray 'zebra lines' on breast sides became gray patches once distant. Flanks were brown with a whitish "thigh" patch frequently visible.

Bare Parts

Bill: large, powerful bill appeared longer/heavier than that of the Common Loon. Dark narial feathers could be mistaken as bill color. Culmen was proximally a pale bluish-gray underneath white (like a healing bruised fingernail)

blending to yellow distally. Tip of culmen (for at least an inch or more) was bright yellowish-blond. Lower mandible was also entirely pale, bluish-gray proximally becoming yellow distally. Tomia pale throughout. Bill in itself did not look strikingly retrousse (turned up) but could suggest this when head was held high. The color was sometimes surprisingly difficult to discern (distances greater than 50m in bad light); the yellow tip was best judged frontally as it condensed and "flashed" against the bird's head.

Legs: tibia and toes were dark pinkish-gray, with webbing bright grayish-pink. (Observed while bird was preening.)

Eyes: iris was liver colored but generally looked black.

DISCUSSION

The Yellow-billed Loon breeds in northern Siberia, northern Alaska, and Arctic Canada, wintering along the Alaskan Coast. It is rare but annual from Washington down to California (North 1994). And is casual to the Great Lakes (Kaufman 1990).

The first New York record stems from a specimen picked up on eastern Long Island sometime "early" 1930 (Bull 1964). The specimen was severely decomposed and was identified by bill alone, which was apparently broken off from the skull. The (lower) mandible aided the identification without reference of/to the maxilla or culmen. The description is "ivory white, darkened only at the gonydeal angle and irregularly basad" AMNH skeletal collection 4005 (Zimmer 1947).

Since the 1980s there have been almost continuous confirmed sightings of Yellow-billed Loon from the interior United States (for example, Janzen 1998). The likely explanation for these is perhaps the increase in observer awareness (North 1994). A recent report came from Maryland (Anon 1998). NYSARC has had no official sightings of Yellow-billed Loon on record (J. Lowe, personal communication).

In the past birders might simply have been afraid or reluctant to put their reputation at stake by claiming such sightings (R. Spahn personal communication). Two factors traditionally have troubled NY State birders regarding the single state record Yellow-billed Loon. No one could say with certainty how long or from where the Long Island specimen had drifted. Also, there was a legacy of almost seven successive decades with zero sightings to fathom. It is not surprising that few if any NY birders kept this species in mind, let alone purposely/routinely searched for it, when encountering loons in freezing winter weather!

CONCLUSION

Now, for the first time, there is proof positive that the species actually can and does occur here. The list of birders better equipped and versed with what to look for is growing. Although, many potential areas are still under birded! The

question now is where, rather than when or if, the next confirmed sighting will be. Perhaps it will occur before 2065! The number of records can only increase with time. What will not change however is the status of Yellow-billed Loon as an undisputed state rarity. This article serves to document the first confirmed live sighting in New York State. Birders wishing to know more about the identification of Yellow-billed Loon are urged to acquire at least one, if not all, of the excellent treatments available today. For convenience some are listed under further reading below. For an expansive bibliography, see North (1994).

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