

THE CHANGING STATUS OF PACIFIC LOON IN NEW YORK STATE

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The Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*) breeds across arctic North America as far east as Baffin Island, but is named for its winter range on the continent's western coast. It occurs in the interior of North America and on the Atlantic Coast only as a rare vagrant..

On 1 Mar 2003 I discovered one at Captree State Park, Suffolk County. Captree is the eastern tip of a barrier beach island, and is sheltered by the western tip of Fire Island, another barrier beach. The two islands separate the Great South Bay from the Atlantic. The bird, in basic plumage, was feeding in the calm waters of the bay, often quite close to shore. It remained through at least 16 Mar, during which time it was seen by dozens of birders and photographed by many.

DiCostanzo (Levine 1998) lists only seven accepted NY records of Pacific Loon, the latest one being in 1993, but comments on almost annual sight records from NJ, MA and RI, but not in NY. It now appears that the status of Pacific Loon may be changing, becoming more similar to that of our neighboring states.

The Captree bird was not the first Pacific Loon reported in downstate NY this winter. One, also in basic plumage, appeared on the Montauk (Suffolk County) CBC (Benson, Burke, Shriber) 14 Dec 02 and was last reported from that area on 27 Dec. Nor was it the most recent – this time a bird in alternate plumage was found in the East River off Manhattan at 23rd St. by Anne Lazarus on 1 May. It stayed until 2 May and was seen by numerous birders who responded to the immediate Internet posting, in this case Metro Birding Briefs, which has become standard procedure on unusual sightings.

That all three sightings might be the same individual cannot be ruled out. However, a different bird was certainly involved in an upstate report from Cayuga Lake by J McGowan, B Prentiss (NYSBIRDS-L) of another alternate-plumaged bird on 28 Apr 03. In addition there was an earlier upstate report of a basic-plumaged individual from Bear Creek (Wayne County) by R. Spahn on 30 Oct, 5 Nov and 13 Nov (*Kingbird* 53:49).

Since 1993, NYSARC has accepted six more records – one report in 94-95, one in 95-96, two in 96-97, none in 97-98, and two in 98-99. Pending review are one report in 98-99, one in 99-00, none in 00-01, and this winter's five (possibly seven if the Wayne County report is of multiple birds) reports. Even if some of these reports are not accepted by NYSARC, there still appears to be a rather dramatic increase in frequency of occurrence in recent years, and it seems fair to say that Pacific Loon is now annual in NY with the records and reports split evenly between coastal and interior.

Reasons for this increase in sightings could only be speculative, but certainly the increase in popularity of birding is a likely candidate. That

only alternate plumage sightings were accepted by Bull (Bull 1974) also contributes to the apparent change.

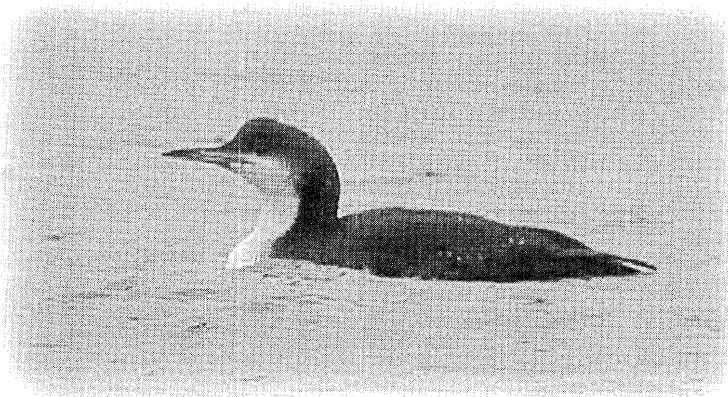
Pacific Loon was split by the AOU from Arctic Loon (*Gavia arctica*), in 1985. Though ID on many records is clouded by uncertainty as to which member of this pair is involved, Arctic Loon has never been recorded in eastern NA. Nonetheless, four of the recent NYSARC rulings were accepted as "Arctic/Pacific", accentuating the difficulty of separating basic-plumaged loons. To my knowledge, no one has claimed an Arctic ID for any of this year's birds, and many report specific Pacific field marks. The Captree bird had entirely dark flanks above the waterline all the way to the rear, lacking the white rear flank patch characteristic of Arctic Loon.

For a specific detailed treatment on the field separation between Arctic and Pacific Loon, I refer you to the Birch/Lee article in *Birding* Vol 29:107-115.

Separation of Pacific Loon from other loon species remains a challenge, especially when the bird is a great distance from shore, on rough water or in poor weather. The Captree bird, in contrast, offered an ideal viewing experience. Visible in photographs (Fig. 1) are a small, slender and evenly tapered bill, rounded head, strikingly bi-colored plumage, lack of white around the eye, and the cleanly separated half -white and half -dark neck. The chinstrap, an often emphasized field-mark, was very thin and pale, and could be easily missed.

Literature Cited

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Pacific Loon, Captree State Park, New York
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