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COLORADO RARE BIRD REPORT

YELLOW-BILLED LOON

Gavia adamsii

Location: Pueblo Reservoir; Pueblo; Pueblo County, Colorado

Date: November 26, 27, 28 and 29, 1992

Setting:

I found this bird about 11:15 a.m. on November 26. I brought Brandon Percival out to the reservoir to show it to also. On the 26th we watched it together until about 12:00 noon. It swam back and forth south and southwest of us at the other side of Pueblo Reservoir from the north-shore Marina. I watched it with binoculars and Kowa 20-60X scope from distances of 300-600 yards. The light was excellent. The bird was huge and low to the water. It was an immature bird (first winter). In general impression it was very large, whitish, with a big blocky head, fairly long neck (longer proportionately than the Common Loon) and a huge, thick-based bill. It fed occasionally by diving for short periods, but spent most of its time swimming calmly along the surface.

I found this bird on each of the subsequent 3 days also. Many Pueblo-area birders saw the bird, including Van Truan. On the 28th I observed it in excellent light at a distance of about 150 yards. On the 29th, I sat on a low bluff above the water and watched the Yellow-billed Loon, in the company of a Common Loon, as they swam directly towards me. They approached to within 75 yards as I watched with my scope. This gave me the best views of Yellow-billed Loon that I've ever had. On the 27th and 28th the Y-b Loon swam with 2 Common Loons, giving excellent side-by-side comparisons of size and color.

Description:

The bird was about 30+" long, a noticeably large loon, even at a distance. Compared to the Common Loons it was about 4-6" longer, proportionately longer- and thicker-necked, higher-backed out of the water, and floated nearly a head higher than the smaller Commons. Compared to them it held its head and bill up-tilted and was much lighter, being grey-brown vs bluish-black, on the back. It had a much more stout, up-turned bill. It was also easily the lightest loon of any I have seen. It had a large blocky head: peaked at the fore-crown in a large bulge; broad front-to-back; and rounded behind. This gave the head a distinctive double-peaked shape. The neck was proportionately long and thick. The bird held its bill up at all times, tipped up slightly above horizontal. The bill shape showed a nearly straight culmen (compared to Common Loon) and a noticeably tipped-up lower mandible (strongly angled gonys). The bill color was pale: rather bright yellow distally, yellow-grey basally and with a darker ridge at the base of the upper mandible about as far out as the nostril. The eye was proportionately quite small, dark, and placed in the middle of the pale white face. The crown and nape were pale grey (paler than on Common Loon). This grey curved back behind the eye to form an indistinct dark patch over the ear. The foreparts and fore-neck were white. The back was medium brownish-grey with distinct, broad, white tips to the scapulars, that, at long distance, created widely spaced whitish rows. The sides were light grey but usually submerged. The rear-parts were blackish.

Similar Species:

The Common Loon is darker, smaller and with a smaller head and shorter, thinner neck. The bill is grey, not yellow, and is smaller, more dagger-like with a curved culmen, and is held horizontally, not up. The Red-throated Loon is much smaller, with small, darker thin bill. It has a lighter, not darker, area behind the eye and shows indistinct light specks on the back. The Pacific Loon is smaller, has a straight, horizontally-held bill, a darker crown, and a distinct blackish border between the dark rear- and light fore-neck. This bird was distinctively different, as described above, in direct comparison with Common Loons.

Experience with Species:

I have seen many Common and Pacific Loons in Colorado and on the West coast. I have seen Red-throated Loons in Colorado and in March 1992 in the Seattle, Washington area. I have seen Yellow-billed Loon once before in Colorado (also at Pueblo Reservoir).

This report was prepared from notes made at the time of observation.

Mark Janos  
10 Sedum Ct.  
Pueblo, CO 81001

*Mark Janos*