

**A NEW BIRD FOR OKLAHOMA: PACIFIC LOON**

BY MITCHELL OLIPHANT

In early November 1987, at Lake Hefner, Oklahoma City, central Oklahoma, a series of events transpired which culminated in the first-ever confirmed sight record of a Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*) in Oklahoma. Less than a year later, on 23 October 1988, John S. Shackford obtained diagnostic photographs of another Pacific Loon on Lake Carl Etling, Cimarron County, far western Oklahoma (cover photos). Thus, a new species was added to the Oklahoma bird list, taking its place with the Common Loon (*G. immer*) and the Yellow-billed Loon (*G. adamsii*) (see Loyd and Seibert 1989). In lieu of specimens or identifiable photographs, a fourth species, the Red-throated Loon (*G. stellata*), retains its hypothetical status (see Hoffman 1984).

The Pacific Loon was not recognized as a distinct species until 1985, when the American Ornithologists' Union separated it from the Arctic Loon (*G. arctica*), a species whose range is now confined principally to Europe and Asia



**PACIFIC LOON**

*Photos taken at Lake Carl Etling, in northwest Cimarron County, Oklahoma, on 23 October 1988 by John S. Shackford. Visible in them are: a line of dark feathers on side of neck; a "cobra-like" shape of head and hind neck; and a faint "chinstrap" on the throat.*

(American Ornithologists' Union, 1985). The range of the Pacific Loon is primarily North America. It is for this reason that a work published before the split (Wood and Schnell 1984), lists two earlier unconfirmed sight records for the Arctic Loon in Oklahoma. These include a bird seen on 15 November 1977 in Roger Mills County, and two reported from Oklahoma County on 10 October 1980 (no details given). In the spring of about 1960, John G. Newell saw an Arctic Loon in breeding plumage on Lake Hefner (pers. comm.).

Although rare, this species has been recorded in several surrounding states on more than one occasion. For Kansas, there are seven sight records and one specimen (Thompson and Ely, 1989). There are numerous sightings for the "Arctic" Loon in Colorado (Colorado Field Ornithologists 1982). Hubbard (1978) cites four records for the "Arctic" Loon in New Mexico. The species has been seen rarely along coastal Texas, and well inland a few times, where two specimens have been collected, the closest at Buffalo Lake National Wildlife Refuge near Amarillo, about 120 miles southwest of the closest point in Oklahoma (Texas Ornithological Society 1984).

The Oklahoma City Pacific Loon discovery came in the midst of a fortuitous period in which area birders were also involved with two other rare species on the lake. One was a Red-throated Loon, the other a Thayer's Gull (*Larus thayeri*). The chronology was as follows: on 4 November 1987, while scanning Lake Hefner from the dam on the north side, John Newell spotted a Red-throated Loon. He distinguished it from the many Common Loons on the lake by its pale gray plumage, sharply uptilted lower mandible and lack of a "knobby" Common Loon forehead. He noted the typical white spots on the back and even heard it calling, a sort of long, descending whistle. John's daughter, Diane, and I eagerly studied the bird after John called our attention to it. It was the first of this species I had ever seen.

Eager to share the sighting with others, I immediately alerted two friends, Jeffery D. Webster and Steve Metz. The next day, Metz and I enjoyed several good looks at the Red-throated Loon through a 30X spotting scope. We were recalling the day's events at my house when Webster called with the startling news that he had that same day discovered what he thought was a Pacific Loon on the lake as well! The possibility of *two* rare loons simultaneously appearing on Lake Hefner seemed so implausible that we at first discounted Webster's sighting as probably that of an immature Common Loon.

Two mornings later (7 November), I was studying a group of loons from the dam when I spotted an individual which seemed different from both the Common Loons which were swimming nearby, and the Red-throated Loon we had identified two days before. It was noticeably smaller than the Common Loons and its bill was slender, straight and almost needle-like. At the point where the hindneck joined the head was a flaring curve of pearly gray which suggested the shape of a cobra's head. A dark vertical stripe on each side separated the white of the foreneck from the gray hindneck. Beneath the chin was a row of nearly imperceptible dots forming a faint "chinstrap" (see cover photos). I began to suspect that I had happened upon Webster's Pacific Loon.

At this moment, Phil Pearce, an amateur English ornithologist residing

in Oklahoma, arrived. I showed him the bird in question and he immediately identified it as an Arctic Loon (or, as he called it, a "Black-throated Diver"), a species with which he had had considerable experience in the waters surrounding Great Britain. Here it should be noted that recent students of the question consider Arctic and Pacific loons to be very similar in winter plumage, but nevertheless separable in the field (McCaskie *et al.*, 1990). The question is of some importance to North American birders since the Arctic Loon regularly occurs in western Alaska. McCaskie *et al.* (*op. cit.*) report observations which indicate that Arctic Loons show a white flank patch in winter plumage apparently lacking in Pacific Loons. Neither the Lake Hefner loon nor the one at Lake Etling showed any such flank patch. Also, the Arctic Loon has never been recorded in North America outside Alaska.

Bolstered by Pearce's opinion, I became increasingly convinced that three species of loons were present on Lake Hefner. I notified Webster and Metz of the latest developments and the next day (8 November), we met again at the lake. During the course of the day we were fortunate enough to get excellent looks at not only the Pacific Loon, but also a Red-throated and several Common Loons, surely an unprecedented event in the annals of Oklahoma ornithology! This proved to be a once-in-a-lifetime event, because the Red-throated Loon apparently departed after this date. Worth mentioning here is that on 25 February 1990, three species of loons (Common, Pacific, and Yellow-billed) simultaneously appeared on Table Rock Lake in southwestern Missouri, "an event that would be very difficult to duplicate anywhere at any season in the interior of the United States" (Robbins 1990). This incident, although remarkable, occurred nearly two and a half years after ours.

The Pacific Loon remained on Lake Hefner for over a month. On 17 November, I obtained several distant photographs of it. These were examined by the Bird Records Committee of the Oklahoma Ornithological Society and by outside experts. Ultimately, it was decided that although they tended to support the sight record, they were still not detailed enough to provide the verification needed to place the Pacific Loon on the official Oklahoma bird list. Fortunately, this situation was corrected by John S. Shackford's photos in Cimararon County. Circumstances surrounding this verification were unusual. Having seen the Lake Hefner Pacific Loon and learned many of its distinguishing field marks in discussions with other birders, Shackford was well aware of the characteristics to look for in identifying this species. On 20, 21 and 23 October 1988, while on a trip to the Oklahoma Panhandle, Shackford saw a loon on Lake Etling which he thought closely resembled the bird he had seen the previous autumn. He hoped his photos, taken from a considerable distance, would permit a determination of *possible* Pacific Loon. However, to his surprise, these photos were of sufficient quality to provide documentation.

Other observers of the Oklahoma City loon included James C. Hoffman and Jim Thayer of Tulsa, who searched for it an entire day before finding it on the evening of 25 November. John G. Newell also saw it on several occasions. In one instance (10 December), Newell was convinced that he had seen *two* young Pacific Loons together. While he watched, one floated serenely in the

water, while the other dove, surfaced, and, turning complete revolutions, raced wildly towards its companion, only to draw up sharply and spread its wings in the other loon's face. The significance of such strange behavior is unclear, but may merely represent youthful exuberance or possibly a tentative exercise in courtship. Newell's last sighting, of a single bird, was on 12 December.

To sum up, three of the world's five loon species have now been documented in Oklahoma and for a fourth, the Red-throated, there are several sight records dating back to 1958 (Sutton 1967; Wood and Schnell *op. cit.*) The Common Loon has long been known as a rare to uncommon migrant and winter visitor to Oklahoma (Sutton, *op. cit.*), but much work remains to be done before the status of the others can be determined with certainty.

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3116 NORTH VIRGINIA, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA 73118. 9 AUGUST 1990.

### EASTERN MEADOWLARK PREDATION ON AMERICAN GOLDFINCHES

BY PATRICK M. BELL

Eastern Meadowlark (*Sturnella magna*) predation on American Goldfinches (*Carduelis tristis*) was observed several times in early January 1988 at feeding stations on Earl Brewer's property in Tishomingo, Johnston County, south central Oklahoma. A record 8 inches of snow had fallen on southern Oklahoma on 5 January 1988. Daytime high temperatures remained at or below freezing for five days thereafter.

On 7 January 1988, Brewer watched as a meadowlark stalked, attacked,