

Illinois' Second Record of the Yellow-billed Loon

By Josh Engel

On 23 December 1998, Michael Retter and I were birding along the shore of Lake Evergreen, in McLean and Woodford Counties. We arrived at the boat launch on the south side of the lake, and began to scan the water. After a short time, we came upon a loon. We assumed it was the Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) that had been reported on the Bloomington CBC, but we took a closer look anyway. Immediately, we noticed the bird's extremely pale overall appearance. After scrutinizing every plumage detail, we concluded that it was most likely a Yellow-billed Loon (*G. adamsii*), a bird of western American tundras and Siberia; neither of us had ever seen a Yellow-bill, so we were quite nervous about reporting the bird. However, we raced to a pay phone where Michael called several other birders. The loon's identification was confirmed the following day as a Yellow-billed by several central Illinois birders.

Description: The key to the identification was the patterning and shape of the bill and head. The bird had a thick, long bill. In the field, the culmen appeared to be straight, but field guides show the culmen is slightly curved. There was a strip of darker coloring at the base of the culmen that ran about a third to a half of the way to the tip. The lower mandible was noticeably upturned, and at very close range a gap between the mandibles could be seen. Because of the bird's big bill and thick neck, the head and eye appeared relatively small. The head, possessing two distinct bumps, was always tilted upwards. The face was pale, with a darker brown crown



Yellow-billed Loon photo by Dennis Oehmke.

and dark eye. There was a pale crescent above the eye. The diagnostic dark ear patch was present, but not as dark as might have been expected. Interestingly, the ear patch was obvious only on the right side of the bird, and even then only when the bird was turned away from the observers. The throat was white and gradually became brown toward the hind neck, with no sharp demarcation. The back was brown, paler than expected on a Common Loon. The back and wing feathers had distinctive buff tips, indicating first winter plumage. These tips appeared as multiple pale crescents when the bird was viewed in profile, and they formed a checkerboard pattern when the bird was viewed from behind. At very close range, pale primary shafts could be seen when the bird flapped.

Discussion: This record represents Illinois' second confirmed Yellow-billed Loon. The bird was seen on the Bloomington CBC on 19 December 1998, but it was not correctly identified until 23 December 1998.

The loon was last seen on 29 December 1998 in the only remaining section of unfrozen water on the lake. Illinois' first Yellow-billed Loon was seen on the Rock River at Rock Falls in 1986. It was first seen on 14 December 1986 and then discovered dead on 30 December 1986 (Bohlen 1989). At least five other Yellow-billed Loons were seen in the interior United States during the winter of 1998-1999. Records include one in New York, one in Colorado, two in New Mexico (NAB 53:2), and one in Oklahoma (J. Grzybowski, pers. com.).

Acknowledgments

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— Josh Engel
2653 Broadway
Evanston, IL 60201
teenbird@aol.com