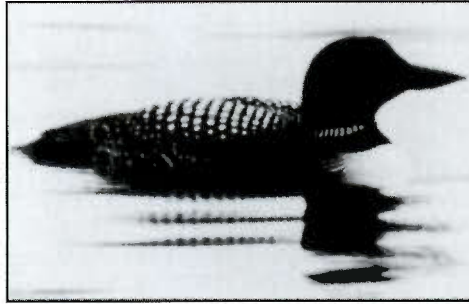


A Loony Trip

by David B. Johnson

No county in Illinois can boast having as many lakes as Lake County, a magnet for waterbirds including loons and various ducks. Indeed, on the Waukegan Christmas Bird Count (1 January 2000), our count party of five recorded no fewer than 17 species of waterfowl on the glacial lakes of Druce and Third Lake in northeastern Illinois have. These and other lakes attract unusual waterbirds, for example, on 26 March 1999, I found a basic-plumaged Red-throated Loon and 23 Common Loons at Eagle Point on Pistakee Lake. Other rarities that have graced the northern waters of Lake County include Pacific Loon and Cinnamon Teal as well as Thayer's, Lesser Black-backed, and Glaucous Gulls. Each time I visit these glacial lakes I'm reminded of their vast acreage and holding capacity for waterbirds during migration before the throngs of jet skiers, "cigarette boats," and other motor boats chase them off in late spring and summer.

Each lake has its affinity for certain species; and each spring I perform my annual pilgrimage to hear and see the first loons as they return north when the ice retreats from the Chain O' Lakes. Spring loons arrive in late March wearing beautiful alternate (breeding) plumage, and many are already yodeling and calling as they do on their northern breeding grounds. Birders typically see loons in pairs on the smaller lakes and in rafts of 10 or more birds on the larger lakes. Peak numbers occur the end of March and the first two weeks of April. Cold fronts often stall good numbers of loons. Birders have recorded



Common Loon, one of 19 present on Long Lake, Lake Co., 10 April 1995. Photo by David B. Johnson.

as many as 50 loons in multiple rafts off Eagle Point on Pistakee Lake during spring migration. The loons depart by the first week in May. Birders find it more difficult to search for loons in fall since it is hunting season, but the best time to look in this northern region is November. The loons are in basic (winter) plumage at this time, and can be difficult to identify.

Migrating ducks begin arriving as early as the first week of February, depending on how much open water exists. Canvasback,

Redheads, and Northern Pintails usually arrive first, joining wintering Common Goldeneyes and Common Mergansers. Other duck species of ducks peak in March; Lesser Scaup are typically the last to leave by the first week in May. Some non-breeding ducks linger on the Chain throughout the summer, and the fall migrants return in late August through December. Late November and December can be a good time to search for an occasional Tundra or Trumpeter Swan in with the more numerous Mute Swans. On the Chain, waterbirds are generally in smaller numbers in the fall.

This bird finding guide covers the best of the 80 plus glacial lakes in Lake County formed by the glacial kettles left behind from the ice age. This guide is a "loop" trip through Lake County. Expect to take a full day for this excursion, and bring your spotting scopes. The Chain O' Lakes waterway maps at any of the commercial boat launch areas are helpful, as are the six county Chicagoland atlas directories.

We'll begin our "Loop Tour" at:

Diamond Lake

Best accessed off Diamond Lake Road off Route 45 in Mundelein or from Rte 60/83 (west of I-94). Park at the Gale Street Inn Restaurant parking lot east of the restaurant and north of the Redwood's eatery on Diamond Lake Road. Note the Mundelein Park and Recreation District boat launch parking area just south of Gale Street Inn. You'll find good early morning viewing here for loons, grebes, Canvasback, Redhead, scaup, mergansers, and coots. A Tundra Swan was here in

winter. Another good viewing area is the park on the lake's north end. Return to Route 45. Turn west on Lakeview Drive, then south on S. Prairie Ave. to the Mundelein Park and Recreation District's North Shore Park. You'll find two viewing areas on the south side of the lake at Oak Terrace/Lakeview Ave, which is best accessed off Route 83. Oak Terrace Park is at the southwest corner of the lake and Bridge Park (Oak Terrace) is at the southeast edge of the lake on Lakeview Avenue immediately west of the bridge and channel. Both these southern viewing areas offer almost

no parking, so unless you absolutely need a southern or south westerly view of the lake, you should bird only at the Mundelein Park and Recreation District observation points. Common Loons often stage on this lake in early spring just when the ice goes out. This lake often has very good numbers of Pied-billed and Horned Grebes, Canvasback, Redhead, Lesser Scaup, Bufflehead, Red-breasted Merganser, and American Coot. Other puddle ducks are seen in lesser numbers. A high count of 290 Ruddy Ducks was recorded on this lake 15 April 1996. Wood Ducks can often be seen in