

A Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*) Visits Vulcan Lake in McHenry County

by Victoria M. Buchwald

Vulcan Lake, a naturally formed spring-fed lake in McHenry County, has been used for the excavation of gravel for 50 years. In November of 1999, I began birding at Vulcan Lake after hearing how good the waterfowl viewing can be there. I have not been disappointed. Since then, I have observed a nice variety of species including Common, Hooded, and Red-breasted Mergansers and all the bay diving ducks, except for Barrow's Goldeneye and Tufted Duck. Cormorants, Pied-billed Grebes, Horned Grebes, and American Coots are also common. I saw three Common Loons in breeding plumage 25 March 1999.

Saturday, 18 September 1999, at 6:30 p.m., I visited Vulcan Lake, a quick seven minutes from my home, hoping to see migratory Common Loons (*Gavia immer*). The sky was clear and the water was still. I brought my Celestron 8x56 Ultima binoculars and my 76 mm Takahashi refractor with a 9mm ocular, providing 67x magnification. I enjoy using this refractor as a spotting scope because it gives a clear, up-close, bright image. (I also use this telescope for amateur astronomy, another hobby of mine.) A spotting scope is required at Vulcan Lake since most observing is done at a distance of between 250 and 500 yards.

As soon as I arrived, I viewed, with binoculars, two loons in winter plumage close to shore.

Both birds preened and swam slowly on the surface of the calm water. The sun was just ready to sneak

behind a hill to the southwest. I was facing north. The lighting was optimal for observing.

I then looked through my telescope and noticed one of the loons was smaller in size. Then I noticed a dark and very distinct chin strap on the smaller bird. Consulting my Peterson's Eastern Field Guide and the 2nd edition of the National Geographic Society Birds of North America, I confirmed the larger bird

was indeed a Common Loon in winter plumage. The smaller bird clearly was not.

Apart from the most obvious feature of the dark chin strap, there was a sharp, vertical separation between the white and dark portions of the smaller bird's neck as compared to the ragged pattern of dark edges bordering the white portions of the Common Loon's neck. Other field marks seen were: a rounded, sleek head; a



Pacific Loon in left background with Common Loon in foreground. 19 September 1999. Vulcan Lake, McHenry County. Photo by Greg Buchwald.