

# Nikon

## Photo Quiz

Sponsored by Nikon Canada



- .clearer, brighter image
- .highest quality materials
- .heavy duty construction
- .superb handling

*Naturally*  
BETTER!

# Nikon

[www.nikon.ca](http://www.nikon.ca)

## August 2004 Quiz

Glenn Coady

For this issue's photo quiz, we are presented with a large, long-bodied waterbird with a dagger-like bill. It is probably fair to say that most observers would immediately recognize this bird to be a loon. As there are but five species in the genus *Gavia* (four of which have occurred in Ontario), the differential identification of this bird involves few potential candidates. Breeding-plumaged adult loons are pretty straightforward to identify. However, juvenile, first summer and nonbreeding-plumaged birds present observers with more of a challenge.

Compared to our quiz bird, Red-throated Loon is a much more delicate bird with an obviously finer head, neck and bill. Red-throated Loon would also be expected to show a straighter culmen and a lower mandible with a prominent appearance of an upward tilt (though this might not be apparent in some juveniles, whose bill profiles are still developing). The quiz bird has a very dark and virtually unmarked back. Red-throated Loon in either juvenile or winter plumage would have a back that is finely spotted and streaked with white. Accordingly, we can rule out Red-throated Loon for the quiz bird.

At the other end of the spectrum, Yellow-billed Loon is a much more heavily built loon than our quiz bird. In juvenile or nonbreeding

plumage it would never have a head and nape as dark as on our quiz bird. It usually shows a dark patch near the ear coverts which contrasts markedly with the bird's overall lighter head colour. A Yellow-billed Loon would have a much heavier and paler bill, with a straighter culmen and a more pronounced gonydeal angle, and almost invariably shows no dark marking to the distal culmen, which our quiz bird does. Our quiz bird also shows a very round head profile, lacking the prominent "bumps" on the forward and rear crown that are evident in most postures in a Yellow-billed Loon.

Having ruled out the possibility that our quiz bird is either the smallest or largest of the loons, we are left with a choice of whether this is a Common Loon or a Pacific/Arctic Loon. Nonbreeding-plumaged Arctic Loons from the Old World show a lot of white in the area of the flanks near the water line. As our quiz bird does not show this feature, we can likely assume that the choice is one between Common Loon and Pacific Loon. Arctic Loon has not yet occurred in Ontario.

Fortunately, there is a whole suite of field characteristics we can assess that are useful in separating Common and Pacific Loons in nonbreeding plumage.

Pacific Loon has a shorter, finer bill, with a less prominent gonydeal

angle than Common Loon. Our quiz bird has a relatively fine and short bill for a loon, and there is very little gonydeal angle. These features tend to favour Pacific Loon.

Pacific Loon shows a crisp, straight-bordered and sharply contrasting demarcation between the bright white foreneck and the very dark (almost black) hindneck. The central line of demarcation is usually the darkest part of the neck, giving a three-toned effect. Common Loons tend to show “fuzzy”, jagged neck markings with a white partial collar often extending into the dark hindneck, and dark areas often encroaching into the whitish foreneck. These features strongly suggest our quiz bird being a Pacific Loon.

Pacific Loons tend to show a very “puffy-headed” appearance with a rounder and “softer” look to the head profile, with a near absence of the “bumps” and flattened central crown of the Common Loon. Again, our quiz bird appears to be a Pacific Loon in this regard. However, be cautioned that in certain postures, both these species can demonstrate prominent bumps and a flattened central crown.

Pacific Loons tend to have very dark backs, with the back colour usually contrasting with the lighter nape. Common Loons tend to show exactly the opposite, with the hind-crown and nape almost invariably appearing darker than the back. Our quiz bird has a very dark back, which is as dark or perhaps darker

than the nape. Again, this is more consistent with Pacific Loon.

Pacific Loons tend to have the area around the iris uniformly dark (with at most a narrow eye-ring), so that the eye is surrounded and harder to pick out in the dark head colour. Common Loons more often than not have white markings around the eye in nonbreeding plumage, particularly in front of, and above, the eye. Once again, this supports our quiz bird being a Pacific Loon.

Most Pacific Loons show a dark “necklace” or “chinstrap”, which is clearly evident on our quiz bird. Common Loons seldom present a pattern that mimics this field character.

Thus, using a whole suite of useful field characters, we can be very certain that our quiz bird is a **Pacific Loon**. I photographed this Pacific Loon in basic (winter) plumage at Santa Barbara, California, on 8 May 1992.

For an excellent review of loon field characters, I recommend you go back and read Bob Curry’s Photo Quiz of a juvenile Common Loon (*Ontario Birds* 12: 126–128), and the very informative discussion of the fine points of identifying small loons in winter by Ron Pittaway and Michael King (*OFO News* 16(3): 6–8). I particularly enjoyed Bob’s description of the puffy-headed appearance of Pacific Loon being reminiscent of an “aroused cobra”, a very apt visual analogy that is easily remembered.