

NOTES ON THE YELLOW-BILLED LOON

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THE following notes on the Yellow-billed Loon (*Gavia adamsi*) were made in southeastern Alaska while I was carrying on field work for the Biological Survey and are published with the permission of Dr. E. W. Nelson, Chief of that Bureau.

The migration of the Yellow-billed Loon has long been one of the problems of northern ornithological work and has been dealt with by numerous authors, Dixon (Auk, October, 1916) and Bent (Life Histories of North American Diving Birds, 1919) being the latest. The presence of this species in southeastern Alaska has been authenticated by the taking of a few specimens, but without positive notes for any extended period. Mr. George Willett has spent considerable time in the vicinity of Craig and Sitka since 1913, and has recorded the species but twice; one was seen in the winter of 1919, and an immature specimen was collected near Wrangell during the fall of 1920. Mr. Gray with 18 years active field work has never collected a specimen, although he has seen it a few times and has a specimen taken from a fish trap.

As I had rather exceptional opportunities for observing the water birds in southeastern Alaska during 1920, I was able to collect a series of nine of these rare loons and make many sight records ranging throughout the year except during the months of July and August. I first saw the yellow-bills at Oliver Inlet, on Admiralty Island, February 6. In my report for the trip I listed them as "two abnormally large loons" which were noted flying up the Inlet. I identified these as Yellow-bills, but as I had never encountered the species prior to this time, and do not believe in sight records for rare species when one is not actually acquainted with the bird, I allowed the record to rest for future verification. I next saw an immature in Rocky Pass, between Kuiu and Kupreanoff islands, March 4; and again, the next day, while bucking a heavy wind in a blinding snow storm in the boat *Auklet* in Keku Straits, one came within a few feet of the bow of our boat. I again saw the species in the harbor at Wrangell on April 23, although I again failed to bring the bird to bag. It is to be emphasized that I identified these birds as Yellow-billed Loons at the time, but had no specimens to back the records.

Any one who has attempted to collect loons knows that the element of luck plays a far greater part than skill, and if he guesses wrongly as to the direction a loon takes when diving the first time, he might as well give up the bird. It was not until May 25 that I secured any specimens. I saw a fine adult bird off Marmon Island, the lower point of Douglas Island; and shortly after, in Gastineau Channel, I collected a big female in full plumage (length, 840 mm.; tarsus, 90; tail, 70; wing, 385). The ovaries of this specimen were undeveloped. Early the same morning, as we came down Stephens Passage, along Douglas Island, at least thirty loons were seen, but it was so foggy I could not identify them. Yellow-bills were next seen June 10 between Douglas and Admiralty islands, in Stephens Passage. There were three of them, two adults and an immature, of which I collected an adult and the immature. These birds appeared very conspicuous as they raised partly out of water, with wings outspread and strikingly colored beaks thrust skyward. Two other

large immatures were sighted a mile farther on, but I did not collect either. June 11 two immature loons were noted off Point Couverton, completing my records of the species for the spring months.

My first fall records were made in Seymour Canal, Admiralty Island. This broad inlet extends for more than fifty miles on the inside of Glass Peninsula, and is one of the favorite schooling grounds of herring. Consequently it is an especially favorable place for loons. During the heavy rains of September 30 and October 1, at least eight yellow-bills were noted, two adults the thirtieth, and six adult and immature birds the first. Again, on October 7, off Young's Bay in Stephens Passage, seven adult birds were seen in one flock. They were so gorged with fish they could not (or did not) rise from the water, but went pattering over the surface, as murrens sometimes do, until they were out of sight—all but one big male which I collected. This fellow was literally crammed with rock cod. (I have found that loons in flocks usually prefer to escape by flying, while single birds usually dive.) An immature was seen within a few miles; and on October 10 I took an adult off Point Couverton, while eleven others were positively identified the same day, between the Point and Glacier Bay, in Icy Straits, as well as two others within the confines of the Bay. Another immature was collected October 24 in Chatham Straits, and another noted; and an adult was taken at Killisnoo October 26, and another seen.

The yellow-bills, according to my experience during the year 1920, can not be considered as rare. They are extremely wary and give boats a wide berth, so one is apt to overlook them unless watching carefully. On October 10, while going up Icy Straits, the birds started for the shadows of the shore or the center of the channel to avoid us, when we were still five hundred yards away. With average light, it is almost impossible to identify yellow-bills, without the aid of binoculars, much more than gun-shot away; and for that reason I believe they have been overlooked by collectors. When a specimen is in the hand, the large size and colored bill seem so apparent that one could not fail to notice them; but in the water, especially in bad light, their size shrinks remarkably, and they do not look different from Common Loons. The last two specimens I collected, I was not positive of having yellow bills until I had the birds on the boat, in spite of the fact I had "worked" on the adult for an hour.

In flight, however, they can be told by their size. If the light is at one's back, these great, heavy-bodied birds stand out with startling clearness,—the long, arrow-like neck is thrust outward and the wings drive forward at tremendous speed. Outlined against the fleecy clouds, with snow-topped mountain ranges serrating the horizon, and ice-bergs of wonderful blueness in the channel ahead, these wanderers from the Arctic regions complete Nature's composition of an otherwise unfinished work of art.

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