

Yellow-billed Loon - *Gavia adamsii*

Date: 29 December 1996

Location: Utah; Washington County; Gunlock Reservoir

Observers: Michael A. Patten, Jutta C. Burger

We were taking an extended trip through the western United States over Christmas break. After heading eastward through the heart of Nevada, we decided to do a little winter birding in southwestern Utah (I had previously birded Utah only in August [twice] and early September). We spent the night of 28 December in St. George, and spent the early morning of 29 December in Colorado City, Arizona, getting my first Black-capped Chickadee (*Parus atricapillus*) for that state. Thenceafter we were devoted to "randomly" birding Utah, as I had no set plan nor any information about good birding areas in this corner of the state (I had left at home Sorensen's Utah bird-finding article in *Birding* that included the Beaver Dam Wash area).

Armed with only a somewhat dated map of Utah, we decided to check out an unnamed (on the map) body of water some 30-35 km west of St. George. It turns out that this body of water was Gunlock Reservoir, where we arrived at 1145 MST. Using both binoculars (Zeiss 10×40B) and mostly my telescope (Bausch and Lomb Elite with 20-60× zoom eyepiece), we scanned the many birds on the reservoir, particularly where they were congregated at the northern and western ends. At about 1230, Burger inquired about a close bird that, upon looking at it through my binoculars, I immediately identified as a Yellow-billed Loon. We studied the bird at fairly close range (it filled my telescope view at 20×!) for 45 minutes under good viewing conditions (80% cloud cover, a Beaufort I northerly wind, and ±50° F).

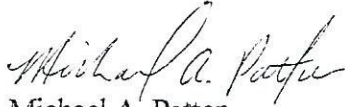
This bird was a large loon. Although there were no other loons on the reservoir, I would judge this bird to be basically the size as a Common Loon (*G. immer*), and much larger than other loon species that I have seen, namely Pacific (*G. pacifica*), Arctic (*G. arctica*), and Red-throated (*G. stellata*) loons (although I have seen but one Arctic Loon, so I am not that comfortable with size range in that species). The head was massive, and the crown had a distinct "double-bumped" appearance in profile, with one on the forehead and the other at the rear edge of the crown. The dark eyes looked quite tiny in proportion to the large head.

Its bill, in particular, was quite large, and probably exceeded the size of the typical bill of a Common Loon. The culmen was mostly straight, with only slight decurvature toward the tip. The gonys, by contrast, was strongly angled upward at about the midpoint. The strongly angled gonys was accentuated by the fact that this bird tended to swim and roost on the water with its head angled upward at ±20° above the horizontal. The bill coloration and pattern were distinctive, and were diagnostic for Yellow-billed Loon. The distal half of the bill was yellow, including fairly bright straw-yellow on the distal one-half to two-thirds of the culmen. The base of the bill (including the base of the culmen) was dusky greenish-gray, with the color extending further out the bill on the mandible than on the maxilla.

The crown, nape, mantle, and wing coverts were fairly uniform dusky gray-brown, with some pale fringes to some scapulars and wing coverts (thus, the bird was in its first winter). The head was pale overall, being a rather creamy-whitish on the face, throat, sides of the neck, and breast. There was a blurry, but evident, oval-shaped dark auricular spot behind and somewhat below the eye. The throat was divided from the breast to some extent by a dark brown collar extending forward from the base of the neck. The line of demarcation between the dark nape and the pale throat was blurry, and the bird lacked the zig-zag pattern on the lower sides of the neck that is shown on first-winter and basic-plumaged Common Loons.

Apparently this Yellow-billed Loon is either the fourth or fifth record of this species for Utah, although there were none recorded as of the mid-1980s (see Behle et al. 1985, Utah Mus. Nat. Hist.

Occ. Publ. 4), and the first was only in 1991 (per the most recent rarities report in *Utah Birds*). I telephoned both Ella D. Sorensen and the Utah Rare Bird Alert line within an hour or two of our observation. On 31 December, I phoned Steve Summers from my California home (i.e., upon learning from Richard A. Erickson that Summers had moved to Cedar City, Utah, a while back). Summers phoned me in the evening of 1 January 1997 to inform me that he and others saw this loon that morning; I do not know if it has been seen since that day.



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15 January 1997 (from notes written while watching the bird; photocopy attached)

29 Dec 1996

70% cover

40°F - 45°F

P0-ZNW

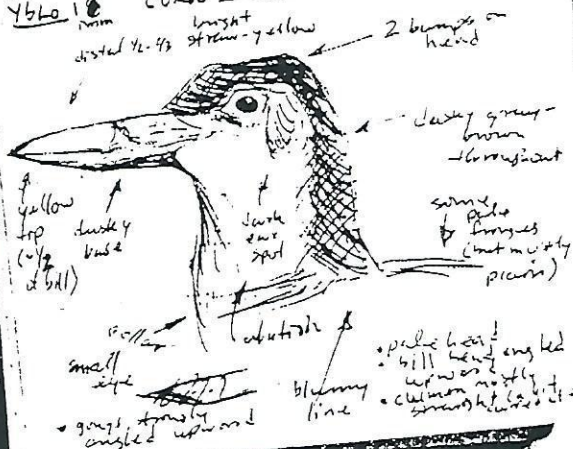
Colorado City, AZ

0800-1000	MST	Hosp	10	LWc	1
Rusa	1	CoRa	20	Mall	6
RSF	4	Sotta	1	AmCo	5
HsF	1	Sosu	5	SPTs	12
Chow	1	wild	5	BeCh	2
Rki	3	HeH	2	Merl	1
wesp	5g				
EvGr	1g				

80% cover, 50°F: BIN

Gunlock Reservoir, Washington Co., UT 1945-1915 MST

wEB	3	PhGr	5	AmCo	50	Canv	10
AmRdu	75	Mall	10	CoSo	2	RuDu	125
ComE	3	Rolle	12	LesC	8	wEGr	1
Yblo	1g	CoRa	2				



Gavia adamsii

Gunlock Reservoir, Utah

Photocopy of field notes written 29 Dec 1996 while watching the bird.

Michael A. Porter