

ARCTIC LOON, NEW SPECIES FOR ALABAMA

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The presence of small individuals of the Common Loon in winter in Alabama makes it difficult to detect an Arctic Loon here, and most Alabama observers are very cautious about recording Arctic or Red-throated Loons. On the Birmingham Christmas Count, December 27, 1975, a small loon was reported without further identification by Ann Miller and Charlotte Blackshear on Oak Mountain State Park Lake. On December 28 & 29, 1975, the bird was identified as an Arctic Loon, Gavia arctica, independently by Bruce Crider and John Dinnie, by Gina and Thomas Imhof, compiler of the count, and by Keith and Helen Kittinger. Many other local observers saw the bird and verified the identification on December 30 & 31, and all agree. Satisfactory close-ups were obtained from about 60 yards with various telescopes up to 60x. The entire period was overcast, but Helen Kittinger obtained several photos in rather poor light.

Numerous field guides and other books, both American and European, were consulted both before and after viewing the bird, and the following distinctive field marks were seen by all: The bill is straight; it is shorter than the head; its depth at the base is less than two eye diameters; the head is small, not double rounded as in Common Loon; the color of the crown and hindneck is noticeably lighter than that of the back; the back has lighter edgings of the feathers, a characteristic of the immature Arctic Loon, whereas the Common Loon has all dark feathers and the Red-throated white dots; the eye has no eye-ring effect nor any white feathers in front of or above the eye as in the Common Loon (but it does have a white area below and behind the eye which is best depicted for all four loons by Don Eckelberry in Pough's Audubon Waterbird Guide). The bird was noted to be a little less than twice the length of a Pied-billed Grebe, which frequently swam in front of it. This feature cannot be used as a positive identification mark because of the small Common Loons mentioned above whose measurements of wing and total length overlap those of many Arctic Loons. However, they tell us that this bird is definitely small enough to be an Arctic.

A concerted effort was made on New Year's morning for many more observers to see the bird and for several to ease the bird toward shore where Helen Kittinger was to lie in wait with camera at the ready for a good close-up in good light. The light was excellent, as it faded off during the night; however, the bird also took advantage of the break in weather to resume (we suppose) the last leg of its flight to the coast.

With 378 species on the Alabama list as Alabama Birds went to press, we are hoping to add a species account for #379, the Masked Duck. Thus, the Arctic Loon becomes bird #380 for Alabama. Whether it is placed on the Hypothetical List depends on the quality of the photos taken under quite adverse conditions.

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