

AMERICA'S ARCTIC BIRD CONNECTION

Over 100 migratory bird species use the Arctic coastal plain of Alaska

FACT SHEET—

Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*)

The Red-throated Loon is the smallest species of all five loons in the world but has the widest distribution of any. It nests around the Arctic Ocean and spends the winter southward along the coastlines of the Northern Hemisphere. Remote ponds are the preferred nesting sites. Except for the Common Loon (*Gavia immer*), most species of loons are seen by humans along the coasts in winter as the birds slip quietly under the surface of a bay or inlet. During that time, the Red-throat is a drab gray bird with a long pointed bill that attracts little notice from fishermen or boaters. In late spring, the Red-throated Loon molts into an attractive combination of gray head, brown back, white breast and a deep red throat patch.

Arrivals on the Arctic breeding ground ponds are announced with raucous calling and ritual flights circling high above the recently thawed ponds and lakes. As is customary for all loons, both adults care for their young. This species is sociable away from the breeding grounds and frequently congregates in loosely knit flocks of 5–50 birds. Along the coasts of the United States, 1,000 loons may pass an observer in a day during peak migration.



Red-throated Loon near its nest with one egg.

per square mile (640 acres) on the wetter parts of the Arctic coastal plain. The loon spends its entire life on water, except when incubating its eggs. It is a common migrant along the coasts of North America. Any oil it encounters destroys both the insulative value of its feathers and its ability to dive to capture prey. The Beaufort Sea area of the Arctic Ocean is experiencing major, increasing oil developments, and oil is used by ships and boats where the loons spend their winters.

Description

In the breeding plumage acquired in May, the adults have a pure gray head, nape and neck and a white breast. A deep red throat patch and a plain dark brown back without any distinctive markings are distinctive. The downy young are charcoal black in color with a pale underside. In winter plumage, the Red-throated Loon has a plain gray appearance, lighter on the head and with white on the throat and breast. In all plumages, the species is readily identified by the bill shape: thin and appearing to be upturned. The lower mandible has a marked upward curve to it, while the upper bill is almost perfectly straight. The females are on average slightly smaller than the males. As in all loons, the feet are placed at the very rear of the bird's body making movement on land very difficult. The wings are sometimes used in diving, but most of the propulsion comes from the feet. During the fall molt, the adults drop all their wings



A winter Red-throated Loon.

Arctic Bird Connection

The Red-throated Loon commonly nests on the Arctic coastal plain of Alaska. Nesting densities reach 6.2 pairs

feathers simultaneously and remain flightless for several weeks.

Breeding

Adult loons return to their Arctic nesting ponds as soon as the ice melts, usually in the first week of June. Pairs and unmated birds circle high over the pond of their choice with loud calling. Prospective new mates may be nearly driven into the pond by the males. Returning pairs quickly settle into rebuilding the nest, which is placed on an island or peninsula, if available, or else along the shoreline of the small ponds it favors. Some pairs will nest along rivers and braided streams. Most egg laying is not completed until the last 10 days of June in most years, with exceptionally late re-nesting taking place in late July. In some years the summer is too cold and no significant nesting takes place. The nest is usually on a tiny marshy island and rarely more than a yard from the edge of the water. One or two eggs, rarely three, compose the clutch, and incubation lasts 24–27 days. The downy young follow the parents around the ponds until able to fly in late August or early September.

Habitat

Red-throated Loons consistently nest on smaller ponds than the other loons nesting in the Arctic. The average pond is only 1–2 acres in size, whereas the Pacific (*Gavia pacifica*) and Yellow-billed (*Gavia adamsi*) loons prefer much larger and deeper lakes for breeding. Red-throats spend the winter in bays, estuaries, and inlets. Relatively few individuals of this species spend the winter on freshwater lakes. During migration, groups of Red-throats are frequently seen over the open ocean, sometimes several miles from land.

Distribution

The Red-throated Loon has the widest distribution of all five members of this family. It nests in the Old World from Iceland through the British Isles and across northern Russia, and, in the New World, it nests from the coast of British Columbia north and west to western Alaska and across the Arctic to Greenland and Newfoundland. In winter, this loon can be found as far south as southern Florida, northwestern Mexico, and the south China coast. It is sometimes found in migration or as a result of post-breeding dispersal well inland in North America; all the major lakes have had visits by this loon, some regularly, such as Lakes Superior and Ontario and Great Slave Lake.

Because of the great difficulty of capturing them in any numbers, less than 200 Red-throated Loons have been banded in North America. None of those banded in Arctic Alaska have been recovered elsewhere, nor have any banded elsewhere been found on the North Slope. Based

upon counts of birds passing such places as Point Barrow, it appears that most of the individual birds of the Arctic coastal plain spend their winters in the Pacific basin. A small number of this species may cross Canada to the Great Lakes and either winter there (Lake Ontario, in particular) or move on to the Atlantic coast.

Food

Small fish and crustaceans compose the main diet of the Red-throated Loon. Small insects are a major portion of their diet on their small nesting ponds. Some pairs move their young to nearby rivers that contain an abundance of young char and other fish. Other adults routinely leave the ponds and return with small fish to feed the young. The Red-throat is the only loon able to take off from dry land, and it needs very little room to take off from the water. Birds use this ability to escape freezing ponds in late summer and when feeding in larger tidal rips or other fast-moving water. A loon will repeatedly fly back to a favored feeding site after the currents have swept it further away while diving. Dives up to 90 seconds in duration are not uncommon. The loon has been found in nets set as deep as 70 feet, although most of its feeding is done in shallower water.

Conservation & Mortality

Loons are very sensitive to oil. Even small spills in coastal waters can kill large numbers of these birds. Entanglement in nets and lines are a problem in some areas. Except for losses while incubating or the occasional young snatched by an avian predator, the loon has few threats besides man.

(Additional information on back page)



North American Range Map: See text about lack of banding data. This map is based upon observations and reports of migrating loons. From counts of birds passing along the coast of the Arctic Ocean, most loons from Arctic Alaska probably winter in the Pacific, although some may go east. The migration corridors in North America between the Arctic Coastal Plain and the Atlantic Coast are unknown. The arrows indicate possible overland routes for these Arctic birds, a well as, for some birds crossing directly across the Gulf of Alaska.

RED-THROATED LOON FACTS—

Wing Span(adults)	24–27 inches
Weight (adults)	3.5–4.35 pounds
Clutch Size	2, sometimes 1, rarely 3 eggs
Incubation Period	27 days
Age at First Flight	7–8 weeks
Age at Parental Abandonment	8–10 weeks
Age at First Breeding	2 years or more
Oldest Wild Bird	no records
Max. Diving Duration for Food	90 seconds
Max. Diving Depth	70 feet
Max. Migration Distance	7,000 miles
Max. Altitude (migration)	unknown
Normal Altitude (migration)	less than 750 feet



THE WILDERNESS SOCIETY'S Migratory Bird Project

Following unmarked pathways more ancient than any living organism, using guidance systems that rival or surpass man's instruments, nearly all of the birds using the Arctic coastal plain of Alaska each summer migrate hundreds or even thousands of miles to areas best suited for their survival each winter. The Wilderness Society has initiated a special educational project to research and describe the major migratory pathways, stopover sites and wintering grounds for the bird species that depend upon the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge coastal plain.

One need not to travel to the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, or even to Alaska, to be deeply interested and involved in the efforts to have its vital habitats protected for all time. Designating Wilderness on the coastal plain of the Arctic Refuge, where the birds, caribou, musk-oxen, polar bears, and other animals rear their young, will forever protect it. This land is where the giant multi-national oil companies are pushing hard for the Congress to grant full industrial-scale construction of roads, drill pads, airstrips and other facilities related to oil exploitation. The area of Arctic National Wildlife Refuge needing wilderness designation represents only 5% of the Arctic coastal plain in Alaska; the rest is already subject to development.

The Wilderness Society project will produce maps, informational brochures, exhibits and other educational materials so the public may learn first-hand about the many migratory bird benefits received from the Arctic, a legacy that our generation holds in trust for our children and, in turn, theirs, indefinitely. The material you are reading was prepared, in part, by the project. Comments and inquiries are welcomed. Please ask how to become more involved with protecting the Arctic coastal plain of Alaska.

The Wilderness Society thanks The Aspenwood Foundation of Sandpoint, Idaho, for its generous support of this project.

Primary information sources:

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Palmer, R. E., Ed. 1962. Handbook of North American Birds. Loons through flamingos. Vol. 1. Yale University Press, New Haven, and American Ornithologists' Union, Washington. 567 pp.

North American Bird Banding Files, US Geological Survey, Laurel, MD.

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