

"NEW" SPECIES FOR PRAIRIE BIRDERS

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In 1983 The American Ornithologists' Union (A.O.U) Check-list Committee announced taxonomic changes which gave area birders the possibility of adding new species to their life lists. The 1983 Check-list includes as "new" Clark's Grebe, Red-naped Sapsucker and Pacific Loon, all of which result from the splitting of former full species and all of which occur in the Prairie Provinces.¹ The principal differentiating field marks and the known breeding range are summarized in Table 1.

What has heretofore been known as Arctic Loon, a single species breeding regularly across northern Europe, Siberia and northern Canada and seen rarely in the southern Prairies during migration, is now considered two species. Only one of

these, however — the newly-named Pacific Loon (*Gavia pacifica*) — is normally found in Canada. The old name Arctic Loon (*G. arctica*) now represents only the populations which occur in Europe and Asia and overlap with Pacific Loon locally in western Alaska.

What were previously labelled as two colour phases of Western Grebe have become full species. The light-phase bird is now called Clark's Grebe (*Aechmophorus clarkii*); the dark phase retains the name Western Grebe (*A. occidentalis*). R. W. Nero's 1957 discovery of 5 light-phase birds in a flock of about 500 Western Grebes on Old Wives Lake in southern Saskatchewan appears to have been the first Prairie report of Clark's Grebe and the only one for many years.⁹

Table 1. MAIN VISIBLE DIFFERENCES AND COMPARATIVE BREEDING RANGE FOR PACIFIC AND ARCTIC LOONS, WESTERN AND CLARK'S GREBES, YELLOW-BELLIED AND RED-NAPED SAPSUCKERS.

	<i>Main Visible Differences</i>	<i>Breeding Range</i>
Arctic Loon	Foreneck greenish (usually); purplish (uncommonly)	n. Europe, Siberia w. Alaska (two of original subspecies)
Pacific Loon	Foreneck purplish (usually); greenish (uncommonly)	ne. Siberia, Alaska n. Canada
Western Grebe	Black colour surrounds eye	Prairie Prov. (common) w. U.S. (less common)
Clark's Grebe	White plumage surrounds eye	Prairie Prov. (rare) w. U.S. (more common to south)
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	Back of head white (continuous with eyestripes)	e. Canada, Prairie Prov., N.W.T.
Red-naped Sapsucker	Back of head (nape) has red patch interrupting white eyestripes)	Rocky Mountains and Great Basin, Cypress Hills

More recently, however, birders in both southern Saskatchewan and southern Manitoba have found either singles or possible pairs several times.^{5 6 7 8} Though geographical distribution of the two species is not yet fully understood, there seems to be general consensus that Clark's Grebe occurs only rarely in northern populations and that Western Grebe is likewise very scarce in southern latitudes. (See *Blue Jay* 42:47-51 for a discussion of differences in characteristics and range of these two species.) Thus, while Clark's Grebe will certainly be less frequently found in the Prairie Provinces than in California, a possibility of even one in any flock of Western Grebes adds to the excitement for birders.

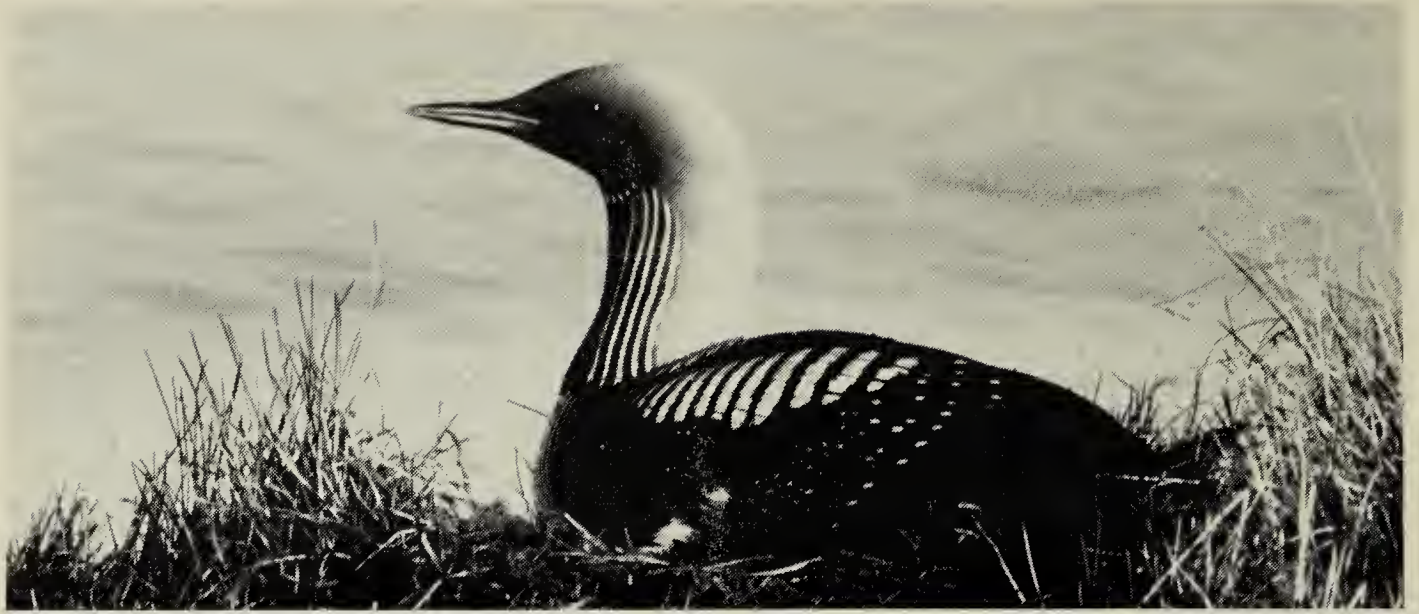
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (*Sphyrapicus varius*), occurring widely in Canada and the United States, has also undergone a recent split. In 1983, a full species was created from a Yellow-bellied subspecies which had already often been considered separate: Red-naped Sapsucker (*S. nuchalis*). The Red-naped variety is found primarily in the Rocky Mountains and Great Basin and in the Cypress Hills of Alberta and Saskatchewan. Reports from Saskatchewan's Cypress Hills in June 1986 by tour groups from both the Saskatchewan Natural History Society (SNHS) and the International Ornithological Congress included numerous sightings of Red-naped Sapsucker. The SNHS group concluded that it was difficult, in fact, to find even one Yellow-bellied Sapsucker in several days' birding.

Because the three field guides generally used in the Prairies all appeared before the A.O.U.'s revisions, none describes these three species under the new names and each treats differently what information is given. Only the National Geographic Society's guide treats all of them, albeit under the original species' names.¹² The text accompanying Arctic Loon mentions throat colour variations.

Clark's Grebe is depicted as a "light-phase" variant of Western Grebe and Red-naped Sapsucker is well illustrated in drawings of Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, subspecies *nuchalis*. Peterson notes and illustrates "two patterns of head" for Western Grebe, but points out no visible differences for the other two species.¹⁰ Robbins et al. describe Pacific Loon under its old name and illustrate both it and the subspecies which is now the new full species Arctic Loon.¹¹ However, they cause even more confusion by labelling their illustration of what is now Arctic Loon, "Pacific race." "Pacific" for them appears to be only a geographical reference and to have no connection with the current species names. Distinctive field marks for Clark's Grebe and Red-naped Sapsucker, in both cases under their old species' names, are shown in photographs in the *Audubon Society Master Guide to Birding*, but this publication does not discuss the Pacific Loon's possible colour differences.²

W. Earl Godfrey's revised *Birds of Canada*, 1986 edition, describes all species, each under its current correct name.⁴ Godfrey gives no map for Clark's Grebe but does illustrate the facial differences. The other two new species are not pictured.

Substituting "Pacific Loon" in field guide entries for Arctic Loon will suffice in general to designate the newly-named loon. However, in this case, the challenge may really be greater than the field guides indicate. Authorities seem to disagree about the reliability of those field marks supposedly separating the two loons: Arctic and Pacific. One of the primary differences is given as throat colour. Foreneck colour in Pacific Loon is said to be purplish, in Arctic Loon greenish. Of Pacific Loon, the National Geographic guide states: "...throat shows purple patch. Patch is dark green in the slightly larger form [one of two current subspecies



"Arctic" Loon (*pacifica*?) on nest, Victoria Island, N.W.T.

Wayne Renaud

of Arctic Loon] breeding in Siberia and perhaps on the west coast of Alaska; . . .throat patches look black under most circumstances." While neither Peterson nor Robbins mentions throat colour, Robbins' illustration of his "Pacific race" shows a green throat and his Arctic Loon a purple one. The Master Guide simply calls this loon's throat "black."

Godfrey refers only to the "black throat" of summer plumage in the *Birds of Canada*, and does not mention any other throat coloration.⁴ This is particularly noteworthy in that it was also Godfrey, writing earlier in Palmer's *Handbook of North American Birds*, who indicated that there might actually be less certainty regarding the role of throat colour in differentiating the two loons.³ He wrote at that time, of what was then Arctic Loon subspecies *pacifica* and is now Pacific Loon: "lower throat and foreneck have purplish gloss, rarely greenish gloss (many specimens show green gloss when held away from light source)" [italics mine]. He went on to describe also the other two subgroups which were then within, and now compose, Arctic Loon. One of these (*G. arctica arctica*), with darker nape and longer wing and bill than *pacifica*, occurs from northern Europe into western Siberia and has *purplish throat sheen* [italics mine]. The other (*G. arctica viridigularis*),

found in eastern Siberia, has still longer wing and bill and has *greenish throat sheen*, except for birds occurring along a narrow coastal strip of northeastern Siberia, which again show *purple overtones* in throat and foreneck (italics mine). To confuse identification even more, subspecies *viridigularis* (*viridigularis* means "green-throated") actually overlaps with Pacific Loon in western Alaska and in eastern Siberia. Finally, Godfrey stated that "individuals with greenish throat sheen but otherwise typical *pacifica* are sporadic in North American breeding populations," thus ensuring that either green or purple throat sheen is possible in any Pacific Loon.³

His ultimate conclusion is not unexpected: "Because of overlap in both color variation and measurements, subspecies (now full species) are separable only by a combination of characters and only in Def. Alt. [i.e. breeding] plumage." Moreover, it is probably only in the hand that identification of these two species is possible. The other characteristics said to be distinctive, i.e., size variation in wing and bill and a slight difference in intensity of nape colour, are not really measurable in a field observation. In plumages other than breeding, the two species are not separable.

In short, a Pacific Loon with greenish throat may be just that — or it might be a rare extralimital Arctic loon. A Pacific Loon with purplish throat may be a Pacific Loon, or it could possibly, though unlikely, be a wandering Arctic Loon from north-eastern Siberia. The average birder certainly cannot know for sure which is which, and even the expert will finally be caught up in statistics. The odds are that a purplish-throated bird in Canada is *pacifica* and a greenish-throated bird probably is as well.

Nonetheless, hoping to find that possible wandering Arctic Loon, members of the SNHS June 1986 tour to Churchill, Manitoba, spent hours carefully examining Pacific Loons through a variety of 7x, 8x, 9x and 10x binoculars and scopes, including a 130x telescope. Light conditions were excellent, with full afternoon sun on the several birds seen, all of which were swimming and diving in open water within 50 m of the observers. Most were typical *pacifica*, with purple throat sheen. Two birds, however, clearly showed green gloss on lower throat and foreneck. In one case this occurred regardless of light direction; in the other the green sheen, though definitely present, seemed to show some purplish overtones with more direct light. While the group very much wished to report a true Arctic Loon, the final descriptions and identifications, regretfully tendered, were of one "Pacific-type loon with definite greenish throat and a second bird possibly the same."

However, given the obvious uncertainties, birders on *pacifica*'s breeding grounds along the extreme northern edge of the provinces from British Columbia to Quebec and in the Northwest Territories will no doubt from now on be carefully examining throat colour and wondering about relative lengths of wing and bill in every Pacific Loon they see. The chance of finding an Arctic Loon is surely very slim — but secretly and deep inside every

birder somehow believes in the possibility of beating the odds!

- ¹ AMERICAN ORNITHOLOGISTS' UNION. 1983. Check-list of North American birds. 6th edition. American Ornithologists' Union, Lawrence, Kansas. 877 pp.
- ² FARRAND, JOHN, Jr. 1983. The Audubon Society master guide to birding. Vols. 1 and 2. Alfred A. Knopf, New York. 447, 398 pp.
- ³ GODFREY, W.E. 1962. Pp. 41-44 *In Handbook of North American birds* (R.S. Palmer, Ed.) Vol. 1. Yale University Press, New Haven. 567 pp.
- ⁴ GODFREY, W.E. 1986. *The Birds of Canada*. Revised edition. National Museum of Natural Sciences, Ottawa. 594 pp.
- ⁵ GOLLOP, J.B. 1985. The spring season. Prairie Provinces region. *American Birds* 39(3):315-317.
- ⁶ GOLLOP, J.B. 1986. The nesting season. Prairie Provinces region. *American Birds*. In press.
- ⁷ GOLLOP, J.B. 1986. The spring season. Prairie Provinces region. *American Birds* 40(3):487-488.
- ⁸ HARRIS W.C. 1985. The nesting season. Prairie Provinces region. *American Birds* 39(5):927-928.
- ⁹ PALMER, R.S. 1962. Pp. 94-96. *In Handbook of North American Birds* (R.S. Palmer, Ed.) Vol 1. Yale University Press, New Haven. 567 pp.
- ¹⁰ PETERSON, R.T. 1980. *A field guide to the birds east of the Rockies*. Houghton Mifflin, Boston. 384 pp.
- ¹¹ ROBBINS, C.S., BERTEL BRUUN and H.S. ZIM. 1983. *A guide to field identification. Birds of North America*. Revised edition. Golden Press, New York. 360 pp.
- ¹² SCOTT, S.L., Ed. 1983. *Field guide to the birds of North America* National Geographic Society, Washington, D.C. 463 pp.