

Common Loon *Gavia immer*



Folk Name: Great Northern Diver, Walloon, War Loon

Status: Winter Resident, Summer Visitor

Abundance: Uncommon

Habitat: Large lakes, ponds

At 32 inches, the Common Loon is about 6 inches longer than the Red-throated Loon. Its bill is thicker and it is straight, giving the bird an entirely different “jizz” than its smaller relative. In winter plumage, its nape is darker than its back. The Common Loon is commonly found on large lakes in our region each winter. Flocks of more than 200 birds have been reported on Lake Norman which are some of the largest flocks ever seen inland in the Carolinas. This loon has occasionally shown up on small ponds in our region as well.

Each year, a few Common Loons linger in the region, and we have records of birds observed during all months of the year. Small numbers of nonbreeding individuals can be found “summering” on our large lakes. These may be young birds that have not matured fully enough to migrate north to their breeding grounds, although injured or sick birds are a possibility in summer as well. In the spring, some can be seen in full breeding plumage.

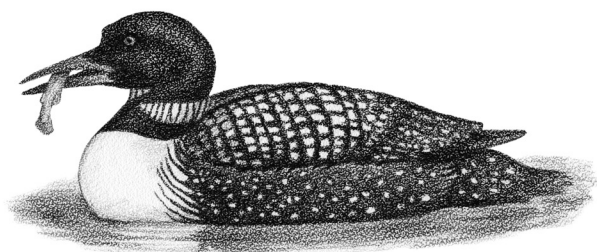
There are several noteworthy accounts of the Common Loon in the Central Carolinas. Our earliest report comes from Charlotte:

“At Phifer’s pond yesterday afternoon a curious looking bird was observed swimming on the water, and one of our local sportsman who was there with a shot gun opened fire on the bird. At the first report of the gun the bird dived and came to the surface in a remote part of the large sheet of water. It was again shot at and the operation of diving was repeated. At least twenty shots from the double-barreled gun were fired at the bird, but it dived as gayly as ever until Mr. Will Phifer appeared on the scene with a rifle and succeeded in killing it. The bird proved to be a specimen of the Great Northern Diver, and is a very rare fowl for this country. None of the shot took effect on the bird, and it seemed to have been shot proof.

“It is a very pretty bird and is now being mounted by Mr. Northrup, the taxidermist, for Mr. W.R. Burwell.”

— *The Charlotte Observer*, May 14, 1886

Leverett Loomis confirmed another four years later: “Of the occurrence of the Great Northern Diver on the Broad and Catawba I have long been aware, but the fact of its presence has remained unverified by a specimen until the present year [1890] when a bird in immature plumage was shot April 26, on the latter river.”



In the late 1920s, managers at WBT radio, one of the earliest radio stations in America, invited William McIlwaine to present several radio addresses about the importance of birds to the area’s agricultural economy and about the kinds of birds that could be seen around Charlotte. During one address, McIlwaine shared with his audience that a bird watcher could “find a loon or two” along the Catawba River if they were motivated enough to drive the 10 miles of roads out from town to get there.

Surprisingly, the book *South Carolina Bird Life* provides a unique historical account of a Common Loon observed in flight over Mecklenburg County:

The Common Loon sits low in the water with the head and beak in a parallel plane with the surface, a feature which always distinguishes it from the Red-throated Loon. In diving, it leaps forward and disappears in an instant, so quickly, indeed, that it is said to be able to dodge a load of shot. The flight is strong and attains considerable velocity. J.A. Pittman, flying a light plane between Huntersville and Davidson, NC, on May 9, 1947, clocked a loon at 90 miles an hour, at 1200 foot altitude.



Common Loon in winter plumage on Lake Norman.
(Jeff Lemons)

One of the first reports of a loon in the Carolina Piedmont during the summer was published by Joe Norwood:

On July 28, 1956, Mrs. Norwood and I observed for about ten minutes a Common Loon on the Yadkin River just below High Rock Dam (Rowan–Davidson Counties, NC). When first seen it was some distance from the bridge that crosses the river; even at that distance its low lying appearance in the water and heavy bill were prominent. It gradually worked its way to within ten feet of the bridge, occasionally diving, and we both had excellent views of the loon through 7x35 binoculars.

On November 14, 1965, Bill and Flo Cobey took a “motorboat” ride out into the Catawba River on Lake Wylie. They encountered a flock of over 50 Common Loons and watched them diving and resurfacing—some coming within 30 feet of the boat.

Robert Kull, a professor of Biology at UNC Charlotte, published the first account of a Common Loon found in Mecklenburg County during the summer:

On 1 July 1974 a Common Loon in nonbreeding plumage appeared on a small pond in Charlotte, NC, about 240 km inland from the coast. ...The bird remained on the pond through 20 July, and was found dead on the shore 21 July. On at least four occasions during the preceding period the loon had tried to fly without success. An examination of the carcass yielded the following: (1) the bird was not molting, (2) the digestive tract was empty, (3) fat reserves were absent, and (4) although no living

parasites were found, over 200 old parasitic lesions were present in the lining of the abdominal cavity. Decomposition made the sex indeterminable.

Based on the above, it appears that the pond (approximately 50 m long) was too short for the loon to become airborne. Presumably the trapped bird then died of starvation.

This specimen is now in the collection at UNC Charlotte. This same scenario has played out at least two more times in Charlotte since this first incident. Most recently, a Common Loon was found on Linda Lake, a small pond in east Charlotte. The bird tried several times to fly off the pond, but was unsuccessful. It was later found injured on a road beside the pond. Fortunately, the outcome was different for this bird. It was turned over to a wildlife rehabilitation center, treated, and successfully released.

Results from a comprehensive 30-year long Canadian Loon Survey completed in 2012 indicate the long-term health of the Common Loon may soon be in jeopardy:

Currently Common Loons are successfully producing enough chicks to maintain a stable population, but research shows that their reproductive success has declined significantly since 1992. If this current rate of decline continues Common Loon numbers are expected to begin decreasing within two decades. Mercury and acid precipitation are the suspected culprits. Other problem sources were also examined including lead (in the past, a major concern), shoreline development, human disturbance, botulism, and even old-age among loons.