

## Red-throated Loon *Gavia stellata*



**Folk Name:** Eel-tricker

**Status:** Winter Visitor

**Abundance:** Rare

**Habitat:** Large lakes

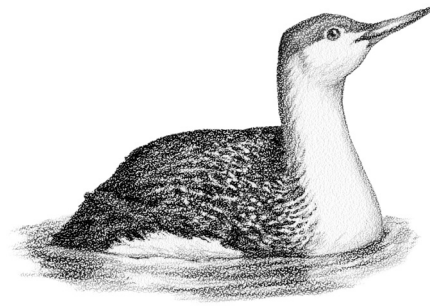
The Red-throated Loon is the smallest of North America's loons. Like other loons, it sits low in the water, but it can be recognized from a distance by its thin, upturned bill. In winter plumage, its head is obviously paler than its back. This loon can be common along the coast in winter, but is a rare find on inland lakes. How did it get its common name?

“The red-throated loon has a red band of feathers around its throat in the Arctic. The red band disappears when the birds fly to [the south] in the winter.”

—*The Gastonia Gazette*, September 19, 1958

There are only a handful of reports of Red-throated Loon from this region prior to the twenty-first century. Two of the first three reports were of birds seen in Chester County, and these reports were published almost a century apart. On February 28, 1885, Leverett Loomis heard what he described as the “loud and unusual cries” of a strange bird. He went to investigate and was surprised to encounter a young male Red-throated Loon “alive and unhurt” in a field of oats. Loomis made a note of how far this loon was from any large body of water, and after further examination, determined that it was “very greatly” emaciated. The bird later died, and Loomis prepared it as a specimen, but his specimen has since been lost. On the Stanly County Christmas Bird Count held December 20, 1975, two Red-throated Loons were seen at close range on Badin Lake: “the upturned bill and gray back were visible on the birds.” On December 30, 1982, Albert Conway and others were conducting the Chester Christmas Bird Count when they observed a Red-throated Loon. Unfortunately, no details of the specific location of this sighting were published.

David Wright found the first Red-throated Loon ever seen in Mecklenburg County on Lake Norman behind the Cowan's Ford Dam on December 28, 1983. Heathy Walker and Harriett Whitsett found one the following year on Lake Norman along the Lincoln–Iredell county line on December 10, 1984. David Wright videotaped a second Red-throated Loon swimming behind the Cowan's Ford Dam on March 20, 1993, a decade after his first one. Two years later, Wright found another one in November in the same general area. Two years after that, both David and Marcia Wright found one on Lake Norman on December 20, 1997, while birding by boat

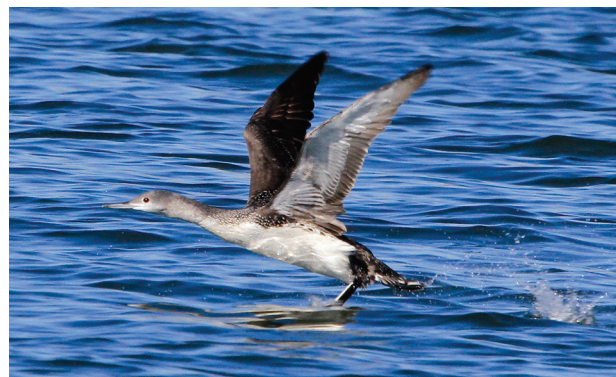


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as part of the Southern Lake Norman Christmas Bird Count. When the count results were published, the count editor noted that “excellent details” of this bird had been provided.

The number of sightings of Red-throated Loon in the region have increased since the turn of the twenty-first century, and the number of birds seen per sighting has increased as well. Our earliest arrival date is 16 November, and our latest departure date is 20 March. Most reports are from Lake Norman, but reports have also been received from Lake Hickory in Catawba County, Lake Wateree in Kershaw County, and Lake Don T. Howell in Cabarrus County. The Red-throated Loon has been reported in or on the periphery of the region 10 out of 13 years since 2004. Birders hit the jackpot finding a group of nine Red-throated Loons on Lake Norman on March 9, 2014. This sighting was without precedent and this note was later published in *The Chat*: “Nine on Lake Norman, NC, 9 Mar (Jeff Lemons, David Wright, et al.) was a fantastic count, possibly our region's highest ever for an inland lake.”

The Red-throated Loon is listed on the Yellow Watch List of birds of the continental United States. It is a species with both “troubling” population declines and “high threats.” It is in need of conservation action on its breeding grounds.



*Red-throated Loon taking off.* (Chris Talkington)