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Two winter records of Pacific Loons at Lake McConaughy

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Pacific Loons are rare migrants in Nebraska, with most of the recent records coming from the western half of the state. Many of the recent records are from Lake McConaughy in Keith County and from Lake Minatare in Scotts Bluff County. Most records are from fall in the short period between 20 October and 20 November. There is a single spring record from April, 5 summer records in the period June to August (all but one from western Nebraska), and a few fall records

outside the peak period. The latest fall record from Nebraska is 9 December. In this note, I detail two January sightings of single Pacific Loons from Lake McConaughy.

On 2 January, 1998, I was scanning the rafts of Western Grebes above Kingsley dam when I spotted a distant loon. I studied the bird from 3:45-4:30 p.m. Even at a great distance, the bird was clearly a small loon, slightly larger and longer-necked than a Common Merganser. The shape of the bird was distinctive: fairly short, stocky body and a long-necked, puffy-headed appearance. The bill was very short and stocky, and I estimated the length was less than the length of the head. Because of the great distance, many details of the plumage were difficult to observe, but I noted the very dark-backed appearance, the sharp line of demarcation between the light foreneck and darker nape, and the dark area around the eye. On 3 January, I relocated the bird off the south end of Kingsley dam under much better viewing conditions. At this distance, the bird was easily identified as a Pacific Loon in first-basic plumage. The dark mantle and upperwings were edged with pale buff color. The neck pattern included a white foreneck with a thin dark chinstrap, a dark gray crown and nape, and a darker black line separating the two. The color of the nape was slightly paler than the mantle. The bird remained in this area through at least 15 January and was seen by several other birders.

On 9 January 1999, I was scanning Lake McConaughy from the K-1 Cabin Area, located just west of the south end of Kingsley dam, when I spotted a distant loon. The bird was with a group of three Western Grebes. I studied the bird from 8:25-9:18 a.m. The bird was clearly larger than the grebes, but did not dwarf them like I would have expected from a Yellow-billed or Common Loon. The viewing distance did not allow me to study the bird in great detail, but I did note several key features. The bill was short, straight, rather stout, and dark-colored. The head was held level, not tilted upwards like a Yellow-billed or Red-throated Loon. There was dark color surrounding the eye. I also noted a clear line of separation between the white foreneck and the dark back of the neck. I did not see a chinstrap, although this may have been due to the distance. The mantle and upperwings were dark with some paler mottling giving the upperparts a scaly appearance. On the basis of this last feature, I concluded the bird was in first-basic plumage.

Similar species and how eliminated: The bird was clearly a loon because of the shape and size. The combination of bill size and shape and neck pattern eliminated the other three loon species.