

Common Loon *Gavia immer*

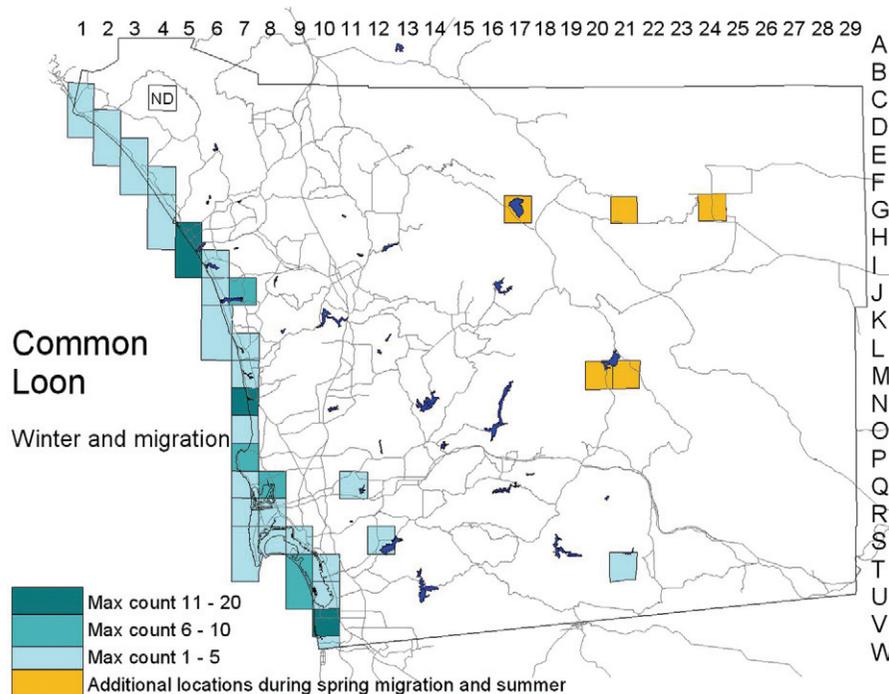
The Common Loon is at best a fairly common winter visitor to San Diego County, widespread along the coast both on the ocean near shore and in tidal bays and estuaries. But the number of individuals wintering rarely if ever exceeds 150. The Common is the only loon likely to be seen inland, a few wintering, exceptionally summering, on the larger lakes. Migrants presumably headed to and from the Gulf of California cross San Diego County regularly but seldom stop unless compelled by storms.

Winter: The Common Loon occurs all along San Diego County's coast. On the ocean, the birder walking the beach or scanning from a lookout seldom sees as many as 10 in a day; 20 at Oceanside (H5) 27 December 1997 (D. Rorick) is a maximum count. The birds may prefer the calm water within the bays. Our numbers in Mission



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Bay ranged up to eight in the northeast quadrant (Q8) 7 December 1998 (J. C. Worley). Various studies of San Diego Bay found that the Common Loon, unlike



many other water birds, is more numerous in the deeper water of the north bay and becomes less numerous farther south. In weekly surveys of the north bay (bridge to mouth) through 1993 Mock et al. (1994) found an average of 10.4 from December through March and a maximum of 24 on 26 January. In monthly surveys of the central bay through 1993 and weekly surveys there through 1994 Preston and Mock (1995) found an average through the same months of 8.5 and a maximum of 18 on 22 November 1994. In weekly surveys of central and south bay April 1993–April 1994 Manning (1995) found no more than 10.

The Common Loon also winters occasionally on inland lakes, at a rate of less than one

per year. Our only such records from 1997 to 2002 were of one at Lake Murray (Q11) 7 January 1998 (N. Osborn), one found dead at Sweetwater Reservoir (S12) 19 December 1998 (P. Famolaro), and one at Lake Morena (T21) 27 December 1998 (R. and S. L. Breisch). Over 18 Christmas bird counts from 1986 to 2002, the Escondido count recorded single Common Loons twice; over 22 counts from 1981 to 2002, the Lake Henshaw count recorded only one, on 31 December 1990.

Migration: A Common Loon heading south has been seen in San Diego County as early as 26 September (1976, one over Point Loma, S7, G. McCaskie), but the regular surveys of San Diego Bay did not detect arrival before 13 October and found that numbers were still building into November. Spring departure is largely in late March and early April, but some remain until May and occasional birds remain through the summer. From 1997 to 2001 only one was found summering along the coast, at Los Peñasquitos Lagoon (N7) 2 June 2001 (K. Estey).

The Common Loon migrates inland over San Diego County, primarily using the same route along Highway S2 and over Lake Henshaw (G17) as the Brant and Surf Scoter. It is seen less frequently inland in fall than in spring, but there are several fall records extending from 1 October 1983 (14 at Lake Henshaw, R. Higson, AB 38:245, 1984) to 24 November (one stranded alive in the north fork of Fish Creek Wash, L28/L29, ABDSP database). The only large flock reported in fall was of 211 on Lake Henshaw 12 November 1985 (R. Higson, AB 40:157, 1986). In

spring, migrants have been found at Lake Henshaw from 21 March (1983, R. Higson, AB 37:912, 1983) to at least 12 May (2000, G. Grantham), but occasional individuals coming down inland remain through the summer. During the atlas period we found four on Lake Henshaw 17 July 1998 (C. G. Edwards) and up to three on Lake Cuyamaca (M20/M21) 28 May–3 September 1998 (A. P. and T. E. Keenan, P. D. Jorgensen)—note that these followed El Niño with its repeated spring storms that can interrupt the loons' overland journey. Another year of El Niño, 1983, yielded the largest flock of Common Loons ever recorded in San Diego County, 317 at Lake Henshaw 18 April (R. Higson, AB 37:912, 1983).

Conservation: Because of its habit of diving and diet of fish, the Common Loon is susceptible to oil spills, other types of water pollution, and contamination of its food. But Christmas bird counts suggest no long-term trend in the number wintering in San Diego County through the late 20th century. Stephens' (1919a) and Sams and Stott's (1959) assessment of the species as "common" suggest it may have been more numerous in the past.

Overland migration is a hazard for a bird that can take flight only from water and is doomed if it crashes on land. On 11 April 1989 an estimated 200 died when they landed along Highway S2 (R. Thériault). Casualties of that fallout are preserved as specimens from 3 miles east of Borrego Springs (F25), 1 mile southeast of Scissors Crossing (J23), and near Canebrake (N27; SDNHM 45700–2).