

LOONS — FAMILY GAVIIDAE

Red-throated Loon *Gavia stellata*

The Red-throated is the smallest and scarcest of the three loons known from San Diego County, an uncommon winter visitor both on the ocean close to shore and in San Diego Bay. There are only a few records inland, suggesting the Red-throated Loon uses San Diego County as an overland migration route far less than does the Common Loon.

Winter: The Red-throated Loon occurs rather uniformly in low density all along San Diego County's coastline. There may be some concentration off Torrey Pines State Reserve (N7), site of several of our higher counts 1997–2002, including the highest, of 31 on 23 December 2001 (S. Walens). On San Diego Bay, the Red-throated, like the other loons, is more numerous in the north bay. During the atlas period our maximum count there was 15 near North Island (S8) 18 December 1999, while weekly surveys through 1993 returned a January–March average of 10 and a maximum of 18 on 2 February (Mock et al. 1994). We found only a single individual in Mission Bay, at the southeast corner (R8) 8 February 2001 (P. Unitt).

The one found inland during the atlas period, at Sweetwater Reservoir (S12) 15 December 1998 (P. Famolaro), may have been a late fall migrant, though a bird evidently wintering remained at Santee Lakes (P12) 27 January–19 February 1978 (AB 32:393, 1978).

Christmas bird counts suggest considerable variation from year to year in the number of Red-throated Loons in San Diego County. Since 1970 the San Diego count has varied from a low of two in 1974 and 1993 to a high of 117 in 1983; that year yielded high numbers of Red-throated Loons on all three of the county's coastal Christmas bird counts.

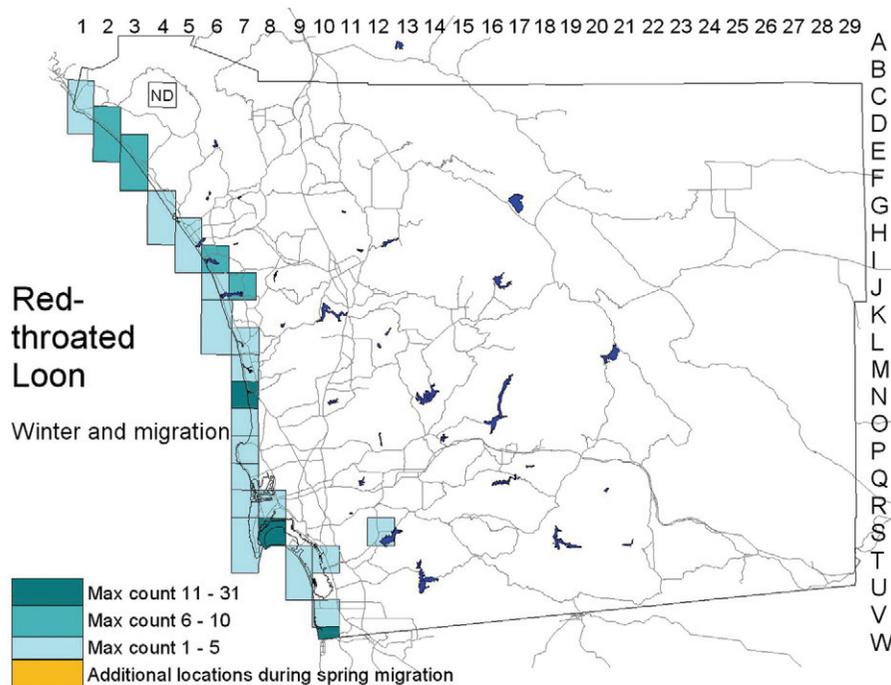


Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Migration: The Red-throated Loon may arrive in October (one at Point Loma, S7, 25 October 1976, J. L. Dunn; two on central or south San Diego Bay in October 1994; Manning 1995). But the species' earliest date on the weekly surveys of north San Diego Bay (Mock et al. 1994) was 7 December. Spring departure is largely or entirely completed in April. During the atlas period our latest date was 2 April (2000, two at Torrey Pines State Reserve, D. K. Adams). The various systematic surveys of San Diego Bay recorded the species up to 14 April, except for one on the north bay 18 May and 18 June 1993 (Mock et al. 1994), one of the few records of a summer straggler.

Inland, the Red-throated Loon has been found in fall twice at Lake Henshaw (G17), one on 12 November 1978 (AB 33:213, 1979), two from 12 to 17 November 1985 (AB 40:157, 1986), and once at Borrego Air Ranch (H26), one picked up 21 November 1996 and released on a pond in Borrego Springs the next day (R. Thériault, NASFN 51:119, 1997). Inland spring records number six, from 8 March (1964; one at Lower Otay Lake, U13/U14, G. McCaskie) to 26 April (1983, one at Lake Henshaw, R. Higson, AB 37:912, 1983). One of the birds at Lake Henshaw in spring 1983 stayed into summer, noted on 8 August (R. Higson, AB 37:1026, 1983).

Conservation: Groves et al. (1996) reported that the number of Red-throated Loons breeding in western Alaska fell by 53% from 1977 to 1993, but this change is not paralleled in the number wintering in San Diego County, as suggested by Christmas bird counts.