Pacific Loon *Gavia pacifica*

The Pacific is the most abundant but also the most oceanic of San Diego County's three loons. As a winter visitor it is often common on the ocean 1 to 10 miles offshore but uncommon to rare in the bays and lagoons. Because of the concave shape of the southern California coast, most of the hundreds of thousands of Pacific Loons that migrate past California take a short cut closer to the Channel Islands and so miss San Diego County. But strong northwest winds sometimes drive fall migrants close to shore even here.

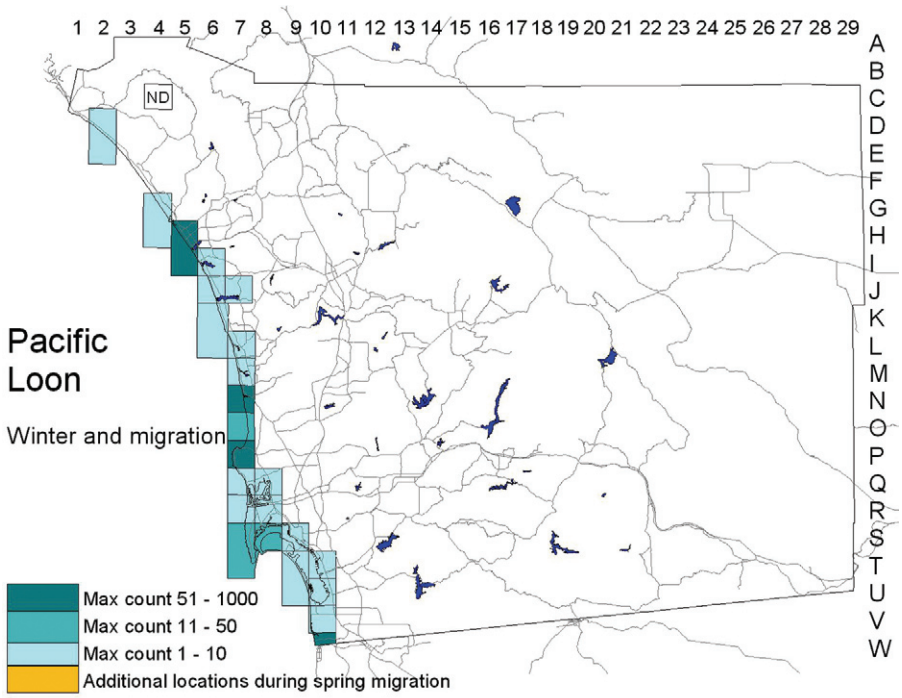
Photo by Anthony Mercieca

Winter: The bight between Point Loma and Imperial Beach is the Pacific Loon's prime habitat in San Diego County, used by as many as 679 on 18 December 1976 and 421 on 20 December 1997 (D. W. Povey). The numbers in this area vary greatly, however: in spite of Povey's consistent coverage of it on San Diego Christmas bird counts 1975–2002, the figures for the Pacific Loon on the count have been as low as 8 in 1975 and 18 in 1994, averaging 141. Along the coast of northern San Diego County Pacific Loons are usually fewer. On 22 counts 1980–2003 the Rancho Santa Fe circle has averaged 65, with a maximum of 583. On 28 counts 1976–2002 the Oceanside circle has averaged 38, with a maximum of 214. Presumably the birds shift up and down the coast with schools of fish. Variation in Pacific Loon numbers on San Diego County's three coastal Christmas bird counts is only slightly if at all coordinated. For example, 1995 and 1997 generated the highest totals since 1976 on the San Diego count but totals well below average on the Oceanside count.

Inside San Diego Bay the Pacific Loon is uncommon in the north bay and becomes scarcer farther south. In weekly surveys of the north bay through 1993, just once did Mock et al. (1994) count more than 10 (20 on 5 January). Weekly surveys of the central bay in 1994 yielded no more than six (Preston and Mock 1995). Covering all of San Diego Bay south of the bridge weekly from April 1993 to April 1994, Manning (1995) found no more than five per day. In Mission Bay the Pacific Loon is inconsistent; from 1997 to 2002 our maximum number there was four on 20 January 1998 (B. C. Moore). The only north county lagoon inside which we found the Pacific Loon was Batiquitos (J6/J7), undoubtedly as a result of the deepening of the lagoon carried out 1994–96. Four sightings at this site included a maximum of four individuals 27 December 1997 (F. Hall).

Migration: Most of the Pacific Loon's population migrates along the California coast. In central California the birds hug the shoreline, but between Point Conception and the Mexican border they take a more direct route over the ocean, out of sight from the mainland (Russell and Lehman 1994). As a result the huge numbers seen at places like Point Piedras Blancas and Pigeon Point are rarely seen at San Diego. Russell and Lehman (1994) found that northbound migrants halted when headwinds were too strong, but southbound migrants may take advantage of northwesterly tailwinds (rare in fall), even if they have to fight their way around bends in the coast. On 6 December 1998, during a strong northwest wind, the loons were streaming past La Jolla (P7) in flocks of up to 100, and thousands passed by over the course of the day (G. McCaskie).

Fall arrival has been recorded as early as 8 October (1973, two at Point Loma, S7, J. L. Dunn), but the weekly surveys of San



Diego Bay did not detect the species until 9 November in 1993. Spring migration lasts from late March to early June, as attested by 25 off San Diego 3 June 1972 (G. McCaskie), three at Torrey Pines State Reserve (N7) 3 June 2001 (P. A. Ginsburg), and one on north San Diego Bay 6 June 1995 (Preston and Mock 1995). Stragglers remaining to summer are rare; the only one during the atlas period was at the San Diego River mouth (R7) 20 July–11 August 2000 (C. G. Edwards).

Pacific Loons wintering in the Gulf of California evidently make their overland crossing south of the international border, in Baja California (Huey 1927). As a result, the species is only casual inland in San Diego County. In spring there are only two records, listed by Unitt (1984). In fall there are three records from Lake Henshaw (G17), each of two birds: 19 October 1983, 12–15 November 1985 (R. Higson, AB 38:245, 1984; 40:157, 1986), and 7–8 December 1996 (C. G. Edwards, NASFN 51:801, 1996).

Conservation: In San Diego County any trend in the Pacific Loon's numbers is obscured by the great variability from year to year. Daily counts of migrants in central California through the entire spring yielded about 1,000,000 individuals in 1979 but only about 450,000 in 1996; the difference could be due to a population decline, a northward shift of the winter range, or both (Russell 2002). Because of the Pacific Loon's funneling in migration through narrow bottlenecks, it is especially vulnerable to oil spills at those points.