



Yellow-billed Loon

(Gavia adamsii)

Description

The yellow-billed loon is one of five loon species, and is most closely related to the common loon (*Gavia immer*) with similarities in size and appearance. Yellow-billed loons are most easily distinguished from common loons by their larger yellow or ivory bill. During the non-breeding season, yellow-billed loons lose their distinctive black and white plumage and molt into dull, light brown feathers.

Species Status

The yellow-billed loon was designated a candidate species for listing under the Endangered Species Act (ESA) throughout its range in March 2009. It remained a candidate species until September 2014 when the Service determined that listing under the ESA was not warranted.

Range

There are five separate breeding areas that are recognized, two each in Alaska and Canada and one in Russia. In Alaska, yellow-billed loons nest on the Arctic Coastal Plain (Alaska-ACP) north of the Brooks Range and in the region surrounding Kotzebue Sound in western Alaska, primarily the northern Seward Peninsula. In Canada, they nest on islands in the Arctic Ocean and on the mainland between the Mackenzie Delta and Hudson Bay. In Russia, they nest on a narrow strip of coastal tundra from the Chukotka Peninsula in the east and on the western Taymyr Peninsula in the west, with a break in distribution between these two areas. The wintering range includes coastal waters of southern Alaska

from the Aleutian Islands to Puget Sound; the Pacific coast of Asia from the Sea of Okhotsk south to the Yellow Sea; the Barents Sea and the coast of the Kola Peninsula; coastal waters of Norway; and Great Britain.

Habitat and Habits

Yellow-billed loons nest exclusively in coastal and inland low-lying tundra, in association with permanent, fish-bearing lakes. Lakes that are able to support breeding loons have (or are adjacent to streams/ rivers that have) abundant fish populations; offer depths greater than 2 meters (6 feet); are large (at least 13.4 hectares, or 30 acres); feature highly convoluted, vegetated, and low-lying shorelines; and provide both clear water and dependable water levels. It is thought that yellow-billed loons occupy the same breeding territory throughout their reproductive lives. There is no reliable scientific information on lifespan and survivorship, but as large-bodied birds with low clutch size, yellow-billed loons are likely slow maturing, long-lived, and dependent upon high annual adult survival to maintain populations. Nest sites are usually located on islands, hummocks, peninsulas, or along low shorelines, within one meter (about 3 feet) of water. Nests are constructed of mud or peat, and often lined with

vegetation. One or two large, smooth, mottled brown eggs are laid in mid- to late June; hatching occurs after 27-28 days of incubation; incubation is shared equally by both sexes. Although the actual age at which young are capable of flight is unknown, it is probably similar to common loons (from 8-9, but possibly as many as 11 weeks). The young leave the nest soon after hatching and the family may then move between natal and brood-rearing lakes. Both males and females participate in feeding and caring for young.

Population Level

Most of the yellow-billed loon's breeding range has not been extensively surveyed, and only in Alaska have surveys been conducted specifically for breeding yellow-billed loons. Population sizes in Russia and Canada have been estimated using anecdotal observations and analysis of available habitats. The global breeding population size of yellow-billed loons is unknown, but is probably in the range of 16,000 to 32,000 individuals with 3,000 to 4,000 breeding in Alaska.

Subsistence

There is no legal harvest of yellow-billed loons allowed in the United States. However, in Alaska's North Slope Region only, a regional total of up to 20



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yellow-billed loons per year may be kept if inadvertently caught in subsistence fishing nets and used for subsistence purposes.

Reasons for Current Status

Since its candidacy to the ESA in 2009, new information on the yellow-billed loon has been collected. There are two primary reasons that listing of the yellow-billed loon was recently determined to be not “not warranted.”

First, subsequent to the 2009 finding, the Service and its partners expanded efforts to better understand yellow-billed loon harvest, abundance, and distribution in the Bering Strait-Norton Sound region with the goal of evaluating the reliability of reported harvest. Based on this information, which includes local and traditional ecological knowledge and ethnographic information, we now believe that only a small proportion of the total range-wide population is harvested annually; that harvest practices or use of loons have not increased significantly, nor are they likely to do so in the future; and that the current population trend of stable or increasing on the Alaska-ACP likely reflects population-level response to ongoing harvest levels.

Second, additional years of survey data on the Alaska-ACP further support

that the breeding population, which we believe to be representative of the other breeding populations, is stable or slightly increasing.

Conservation Measures

The Service, working with a variety of Native, State and Federal partners, are implementing conservation measures to protect the yellow-billed loon in northern and western Alaska. We expect these cumulative actions will reduce impacts on yellow-billed loons.

The Service and its partners agreed to implement the following strategies: (1) implement specific actions to protect yellow-billed loons and their breeding habitats in Alaska from potential impacts of land uses and management activities, including oil and gas development; (2) inventory and monitor yellow-billed loon breeding populations in Alaska; (3) reduce the impact of subsistence activities (including fishing and hunting) on yellow-billed loons in Alaska; and (4) conduct biological research on yellow-billed loons, including response to management actions.

The strategies outlined demonstrate the partners’ commitment to prioritize yellow-billed loon conservation in Alaska. The Service continues to work with partners to maintain their commitment

to actions protecting loons. Specifically:

- The Service works closely with the Bureau of Land Management to monitor and maintain protection of loons on the National Petroleum Reserve-Alaska.
- The Service works closely with the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement to minimize impacts on yellow-billed loons from oil and gas activities in Arctic Outer Continental Shelf regions.
- The Service continues to inventory yellow-billed loons through waterfowl

surveys on the Alaska-ACP and will continue to investigate the potential for initiating other yellow-billed loon-specific surveys (e.g., in Arctic waters); the National Park Service will continue loon-specific surveys currently in operation on the Seward Peninsula.

- The Service’s Endangered Species and Migratory Bird Management programs are working closely with the Alaska Migratory Bird Co-management Council (AMBCC), the native corporations, local communities in the Bering Strait region, the North Slope Borough and the State of Alaska to acquire reliable, verifiable information on subsistence harvest and fishing by-catch levels in Alaska, and to substantially increase education and law enforcement efforts to reduce levels of this threat.

- The Service supports the ongoing research by the USGS and others on yellow-billed loons in Alaska.

For more information, contact:

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