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Stephen J. Dinsmore

Fort Collins, CO, cootjr@iastate.edu

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Red-throated Loon at Lake McConaughy

Stephen J. Dinsmore
612 1/2 West Magnolia St.
Fort Collins, CO 80521

On 8 May 1998 I observed a Red-throated Loon at Lake McConaughy in Keith County, Nebraska. I was scanning Arthur Bay when I spotted a small loon swimming with several Western Grebes. I immediately recognized the bird as a Red-throated Loon in basic plumage. I studied and photographed the bird from 2:25 to 3:13 p.m. The bird was slightly larger and shorter-necked than a Western Grebe. The plumage was quite plain. The throat, cheek, foreneck, and underparts were white. The forehead, crown, nape, mantle, and wings were dark gray with a few pale spots on the mantle. The bill was very short and thin and the lower mandible was angled upward, giving the bill an upturned appearance. The area surrounding the eye was white. The bird also held its head tilted slightly upward. The distinction between dark gray and white on the head and neck was less clear-cut than on a Pacific Loon. I concluded that the bird was probably an adult in basic plumage because of the dark-backed appearance, although it is possible the bird was molting from first-basic to first-alternate plumage.

This sighting is the first documented spring record of a Red-throated Loon in Nebraska. There are seven other spring reports in the period between 6 April and 3 May; at least some of these are probably correct. This represents only the second record from western Nebraska, the other from ca. fall 1900 in Frontier County (Swenk, M.H. 1933. A Brief Synopsis of the Birds of Nebraska. I. Loons. Nebraska Bird Review 1: 87-90.). I thank W. Ross Silcock for providing information on other records of Red-throated Loons in Nebraska.