

RED-THROATED LOON BREEDING ON THE SOUTH MAINLAND COAST OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

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In British Columbia, the Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*) breeds locally on small freshwater lakes near the seacoast from Nitinat Lake on southern Vancouver Island northward to Misty Lake, on the adjacent mainland coast from Takush Harbour north to Kitsault, and throughout the Queen Charlotte Islands. There is a small disjunct breeding population in the vicinity of Chilkat Pass in extreme northwestern British Columbia (Campbell et al. 1990).

On the south mainland coast, from Lund and Powell River south to the Canada/U.S. border, the species is considered a common winter resident and casual in summer (at sea) in the vicinity of Greater Vancouver (Campbell et al. 1972a; Elliott and Gardner 1997). North, along the Sunshine Coast, the species is listed as a rare transient and winter visitant (at sea) from mid-October to early April (Greenfield 1997). Inland occurrences at any season in the Lower Mainland area (e.g., Pitt Lake, Pitt River, Harrison Lake, and Alouette Lake) are the exception (Campbell et al. 1972b, 1974, 1990). There are no inland occurrences on lakes for the Sunshine Coast Regional District, an area bounded by McNab Creek and Port Melon in the south to Earl's Cove and Egmont in the north (Greenfield 1997, D. Brown, pers. comm.).

On 1 August 2006 I visited Powell Lake, east of Powell River, for a boating trip to confirm conversations about Red-throated Loons nesting in the area. We had arrived at "Second Narrows" and within five minutes two adult Red-throated Loons showed up. These may have been the pair that had apparently nested unsuccessfully in 2006. The site is sheltered, and anchored floating logs provide the necessary nest substrate (Figure 1). However, when larger boats pass through the "gap" they do not slow down, subsequently creating waves that wash over



Figure 1. Red-throated Loon nest site, on floating logs, in "Second Narrows", Powell Lake, BC. 1 August 2006 (Clyde H. Burton). BC Photo 3435.

the logs, which can easily flush the eggs out of the nest.

While observing the adult loon another pair flew overhead flying up Powell Lake. We motored towards Rainbow Lodge, about 1.6 km away, and when we arrived three more Red-throated Loons, all in adult plumage, were seen. We suspected another nest site was nearby, as one of the loons was quite anxious and displayed near the boat.

It appears that Red-throated Loons have been known to nest locally in Powell Lake since at least the late 1950s or early 1960s. In 1968 Jack Macdonald moved to his float house on the lake and was told by the previous owner that the loons were "well established" when he arrived. Some biologists questioned the observations claiming that Red-throated Loons did not "nest this far south" so documentation was never encouraged. Each year a pair of loons nest on floating logs attached to the float house and they raise either one or two young. Occasionally, like 2006, they are unsuccessful. The birds leave the lake in the autumn presumably to winter on the ocean.

In 1998, Jack photographed and watched a pair of nesting loons through a hole in his shed, which was only 2.1 m (7 ft) from the nest. The nest was initiated in late May and the first egg was laid 1 June. Two eggs were laid (Figure 2) but only one hatched. In early July a newly hatched chick was fed a trout but was unable to swallow it. By the fourth day it had no problem swallowing similar-sized trout (Figure



Figure 2. Adult Red-throated Loon attending its nest with two eggs. Powell Lake, BC. June 1998 (Jack Macdonald). BC Photo 3436.

3). He observed the chick consume six such trout in one day at this young age. He also commented that the chick grew quite rapidly.

Powell Lake is a large reservoir, about 52 km long, with many snags and fluctuating water levels. It lies at 56 m elevation and is a high recreation area used for hiking, fishing, swimming, picnicking, camping, canoeing, and boating as well as industrial log transport and booming. Over 250 float homes have been built on the lake and are accessible only by boat and float plane. There are probably many suitable nest sites on human-made structures, such as floating logs tied together for anchorage and protection that require further investigation. Fluctuating water levels may not pose a threat to nesting loons since the nest floats up and down with water heights but waves from larger boats seem to be an issue.

Traditional nest sites should be identified and mitigation recommendations may consider posting



Figure 3. Adult Red-throated Loon feeding a recently hatched chick a trout. Powell Lake, BC. July 1998 (Jack Macdonald). BC Photo 3436.

speed limits or adding protective floating logs to break wave action. The nesting population, the most southerly known for the mainland coast of British Columbia, has survived for over two decades. What is not known is the status of breeding Red-throated Loons on the other 32 lakes in the Powell River area.

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About the Author

Clyde was raised on the southeast coast of Newfoundland and had easy access to birds, particularly seabirds, as a youngster. His first real love for birds came at seven years old when he raised a gull to fledging and released it. Later he went on to help owls, eagles, gannets, murrees, skuas, and more gulls. By 12 years old he was keeping a written diary

of local birds.

In 1969 Clyde moved to British Columbia and immediately helped establish a wildlife sanctuary near Powell River. Over the years he kept busy at his career but found time to give illustrated lectures to schoolchildren usually followed by field trips.

Although retired, Clyde is still actively involved in local wildlife activities, especially as they relate to conservation, and regularly contributes wildlife information for the Powell River area.