



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

Red-throated Loon *Gavia stellata*

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The Red-throated Loon is the smallest and least robust member of its family. It is a diving bird with a relatively slender bill used to feed on fish, leeches, mollusks, and aquatic insects. In flight, its feet trail behind the body and appear relatively small compared to those of other loons.

Although the plumage of the sexes is identical, the male is larger and heavier than the female. In breeding plumage, the upperparts are relatively plain, the head is pale-gray, and the neck has a dark rust-red throat patch. Non-breeding plumage is characterized by extensive white on the neck and face and a sharply contrasted dark crown and hindneck.

Both sexes help build a nest, incubate eggs, and care for the young. The nest is made out of decayed vegetation, grass, moss and mud, and is usually constructed in low-lying wetlands near shallow ponds. The average clutch size is two eggs, which are dark olive with blackish-brown blotches. Chicks are born semiprecocial, but depend on parents for food for several weeks.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: The breeding range includes the Alaskan coast and tundra, the coastal plain of northern Canada, and east to Newfoundland. This species prefers the tundra and coastal regions for nesting, but it is also found in mountainous regions and some forested areas.

The Red-throated Loon generally winters on coastal water south of the breeding areas and occasionally on inland lakes and rivers near the coast. Along the Atlantic Coast, they winter from Newfoundland to as far south as the east coast of Florida. They are a regular but uncommon species along coastal Massachusetts during the winter months, but numbers increase during spring and fall migration when they are considered to be common to abundant.



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HABITAT DESCRIPTION: This loon species prefers to breed in low wetlands, but may also use mountainous areas, bogs and forested terrain. Nesting ponds tend to be small where this species is sympatric with Pacific Loon, but they may be large where Red-throated is the only breeding member of its family.

THREATS: Oil spills threaten wintering populations in North America, and are potentially devastating to breeding loons during spring or summer. Declines of up to 50% of the population have been reported in some regions, and this may be, at least partially, a result of high nest predation. This species is also susceptible to habitat loss through climate change.

REFERENCES:

- Barr, J.F., C. Eberl and J.W. Mcintyre. 2000. Red-throated Loon (*Gavia stellata*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America Online: <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna/species/513> doi:10.2173/bna.513
- Veit, R., and W. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*. Massachusetts Audubon Society.

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A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

1 Rabbit Hill Rd., Westborough, MA; tel: 508-389-6300; fax: 508-389-7890; www.mass.gov/dfw

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