

The Canadian Field-Naturalist

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS TO COVER PICTURE, 135(2): A few pages from Aleta Karstad's natural history journal about the encounter and initial sketches that resulted in the painting on the cover of *The Canadian Field-Naturalist* 135(2), published with the permission of the artist. © Aleta Karstad. Enlarged art prints of any or all of these pages are available with prices from \$50 to \$250 for each page, depending on size. Contact the artist at: www.aletakarstad.com

30 May, 1990 Drizzle Lake, Graham Is.,
Queen Charlotte Islands, B.C.

The Red Throated Loons had lost one of their two large, olive, black-spotted eggs, when Tom Reimchan and Shiela took us across the bog to show us the approach to the observation blind two days ago. Dad turned back with the poodle Pepper, expecting us to follow soon, as Mom was preparing supper in the camper, but the male Red throated Loon, who had seemed nervous as I watched him through my spotting scope to make a sketch, suddenly left the nest, and Tom and Shiela wanted to count the eggs and make sure that the parent returned. The appearance of only one of the two eggs is a mystery - Tom and Shiela could think of no obvious explanation. The adult was very cautious in his return to the floating, moss-covered nest platform, anchored about three metres from shore, and he took a long time in deciding to climb out of the water and settle on the nest. He had been frightened by an eagle overhead. The Redthroats nest on little islands in fresh water, and take turns flying away to find food in the sea. They are not well adapted to aerial predators, as they have none where most nest in the Arctic and in Europe. The small population of Red throats in the Charlottes

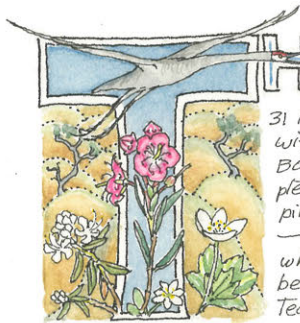
is seriously threatened by eagles. While Tom and Shiela shared our supper in the camper, they hushed us to hear a long series of excited, irregularly-spaced "quacks," as the female Red throat announced her approach to the lake, home from fishing in the sea.

Yesterday was grey, windy with intermittent rain, and we all started the day late, tired from the excitement of our arrival on the Charlottes. I washed my hair and completed an earlier journal page, and Dad and I took my dome studio tent across the bog to pitch near the cabin by the lake, in case bad weather prevented me from painting at the blind. We checked the nest briefly, and found the female incubating (she has seven neck-stripes, and the male has more). We returned to camp at about 20:30.



This morning I set out on my own, following the grooves of 'braided' trail worn into the bog mat, keeping the forest to the right hand as I crossed the first bog, then after passing through the narrow band of taller trees, keeping to the left side of the next open area. I had an early lunch at the cabin, and arrived at the blind at about noon. We had heard a Redthroat coming home "this morning at about 10:00. That had been the female, and she is still on the nest. I have watched her pretty steadily for a couple of hours, memorizing every little curve and angle, doing another drawing in my sketchbook, and worrying about the likelihood that the position she is in now will be one I'll prefer in the future if I begin the big painting now ... and waiting for her to move, or for her mate to come home. She was scared off the nest three times by the passing of an eagle, at about two hourly intervals. She returned promptly, the first two times, turned the egg wet-side up, and then settled on it with her back to me. But the third time the eagle came close above the nest, and hovered with yellow feet dangling, as if to drop -- but it was only an egg, so the predator passed on. It landed in a tree across the bay, but the loon saw it, and kept up a monotonous, pitifully distraught calling, until it left after about ten minutes.

← watching a soaring eagle.



THE bog is in bloom, Drizzle Lake, Graham Island, 31 May 1990 — sprinkled with blowsy pink cups of Bog Laurel, with closely pleated buds like dark pink, faceted gemstones — and littered with white four-petaled Cloud-berry flowers. Labrador Tea is bursting open in

little white flowers from its tightly clenched bunches of buds, like minute popcorn, and the demure pink bells of Bog Rosemary nod amidst the Sphagnum hummocks.

Dad was following an old trail that leads from the highway, a bit south of our gravel pit, to the east side of the cabin at Drizzle Lake, soon after I arrived today, and he flushed a pair of Sandhill Cranes which had been standing together just behind the greenhouse. Their loud trumpeting brought me out of the cabin to see them circling above, with long legs trailing, blaring away with voices that seemed louder than any animal should need to have. We flushed them again, from the woods just south of there, when Dad led us (with Morn Jennie and Pepper dog, who had come to see the blind and the loons just as I was packing up) back along his new-found trail in the evening. Perhaps they are nesting near the cabin, since this is the first summer in 10 years that Tom and Sheila are not living there full time. There is a steady wind from the north today, with sun, and air temperature of about 15°C.

The male Red-throated Loon was on the nest for most of the day. I drew the female for the painting, yesterday, and since then, I can see that the male is ever so slightly less delicate and elegant. He lacks a little of the character she has about the eyes and forehead. His bill is more impressive though. The lower mandible has a more distinct angle than hers, and the whole top surface of the upper mandible is pure white, while hers seems to be the colour of the rest of the bill. His red throat extends a trifle higher up under the chin than hers.* I am keeping to the drawing of the female, but painting it from the male today, and got the bill, head and neck done before I lay down, tired from peering through the scope and having the wind blow in my face, through the thin burlap of the blind. When I got up after about an hour, I took my skirt off (I was wearing it overtop of my pants) and draped it over and down both sides of the telescope, and it was such a comfort to have shelter for my face.

At 17:25 the female flew quacking in to the east end of the lake, and the male stretched his head out low from the nest and greeted her with five loud wailing calls. She quacked again, with increased tempo, and subsided, and then we waited a long time for her to appear, he more patiently than I. When nothing much was happening to keep him alert, he passed the time by doing what I call "squinting and lolling." He'd close his nictitating membrane and pull his lower eyelids way up over most of the eyes, and rear or drop his head backward. From this attitude he'd either snap into alertness, raising his head (*she holds her bill tip a little higher than he does)

and opening his lovely red eyes, or else he'd loll further, letting his head and neck drop sideways onto his back, and with his eyes pulled half closed like that, he really looked like a dead bird. The wind dropped a little, and Varied Thrushes exchanged single, reedy "wooden whistle" comments. About six of them took turns, evenly spaced along the shore, each with a different note, and together they made a very slow tune, with six-to-twelve second pauses between notes.

At 18:11 the male made one low "coo" sound, and another such little comment a couple of minutes later. At 18:22 he made more soft sounds like a brooding hen, and then I saw her, preening herself about fifty metres off shore, rolling over on her side and preening her white belly feathers, with one foot up in the air. Then she raised herself up and flapped her wings, and the male "coo"ed again. She swam toward the nest a little then, but fell to preening again, and sunning her feet, and even had a few short naps, her neck folded over her back, bill buried between her wings. At 18:40 he "coo"ed again, and she dove and came up nearer. Then he called regularly, "cooew" softly, and she dived again and was a metre away. He hopped off the nest into the water, took a quick drink, and within a minute she was on the nest, shuffling down onto the egg. She raised her breast after a minute or two, rolled the egg, and settled again, looking self-satisfied and very lovely. We heard two volleys of quacks from the male up in the air, then he was gone. I painted her black and white neck stripes, then.

1 June 1990 Drizzle Lake, Graham Is.,
Queen Charlotte Islands, B.C.

I finished the head and neck of my Red Throated Loon painting yesterday, and started again today at 11:00. The female was on the nest, replaced by her mate at about 13:00. It was very windy from the south, with the nest platform rocking, and the loons seemed rather anxious. So was I. I couldn't decide on a position for the body of the bird. I wasn't being presented with the rear position, which I favored, and couldn't decide to draw a side position, and there's no predicting which position the birds will favor most. By 14:00 I couldn't sit still myself. It was even impossible to work on the surrounding vegetation, as a change in the way I draw the body should change the setting a little, too. I was wondering whether Tom + Sheila had a photograph of a good back position, which I could follow for shape and feather position, and it ~~was~~ seemed better to check that out before I committed myself to a position. So, once decided to go and see about that, I packed up in a hurry, and crossed the bog in a record 20 minutes, afraid I'd see the camper pulling out on an errand for water.

The Queen Charlotte City postmaster brought my priority post mail home to Tlell with her, and we picked it up — 30 Cumshewa Head Trail Guides — hot off the press, from Western Canada Wilderness Committee. Then we spent the evening with Tom + Sheila, very much encouraged by their enthusiastic response to the loon

painting's start, and it was a pleasure to sign a Cumshewa Head book for them, my first publication of entire journal pages. They showed us a video they had taken of hummingbirds at their feeder — incredible slowing of the wingbeat taken at normal action time, with an adjustment of the ratio of frame speed and interval, exposure of $\frac{1}{4000}$ of a second every $\frac{1}{30}$ of a second. We left their 28 foot trailer, perched above a long sandy beach, at about dusk, and drove through a seaside meadow flanked by tall Sitka Spruces, to camp just inside their gate, as a doe Muledeer and yearling fawn stood calmly to one side.

3 June. Spent yesterday mailing Cumshewa Head books from Port Clements and phoning people about it, not feeling too badly about missing a day of painting, as it was a very wet day — drenching rain in a dense fine spray. I began painting at 09:00 today, and worked until 19:00. A light breeze from the S.W. in the morning, which reversed after it rained for a half hour or so at noon. Still one egg, not hatched! The male came to the nest at 10:50, but the female remained on nest until 11:15, didn't want to get off, though the male came and asked her, three separate times. She just "coo"ed at him in a little high voice. The male was scared from the nest twice, no eagle evident to me the first time, but I heard the rush of great wings after the loon had fled the second time. Then he exchanged wailing calls with another Redthroat who called from the east end of the lake. Fresh bear track between the cabin and the blind.

4 June. Mostly sunny, but rained at noon, breeze from the north, about 17°C. I painted from 13:00 until 19:00. The female was on the nest all afternoon. She was kept off the nest by an eagle for about twenty minutes, as it perched in a tree only a couple of hundred yards down the shore, so I had to walk through the cedar forest for a ways, and out onto the gravel beach to flush it from its lurking place. The loon returned to her egg as soon as I got back to the blind.

5 June. Mostly sunny and about 17°C, with a light S.W. wind. I scared a bear, which crashed off into the woods, when I walked to the blind. Painted from 12:00 until 19:45. The egg is pipped! A rectangular hole, about a cm. in length. The male came at 13:30, but stayed on the lake, preening + napping, until his mate finally called him to the nest at 17:15. There was a tremendous Kingfisher fight in late afternoon, and a lot of what seemed display diving with calling on the dive and return. Mom, Dad, Jennie + Pepper came to walk back with me. They saw the Sandhill cranes in flight.

6 June. A bell-clear day, with a strong northerly breeze. I arrived at the blind at 11:00. Soon after, the male loon noticed, and both of us heard, an eagle, but he didn't leave nest, because he has a baby loon under his wing! It came out from beneath the parental wing once, and explored around to the other side, and back again. I have completed the loon's back today, and left at 14:00.





HEILA

and Tom came this morning, to do their bi-weekly circuit of the Lake for beach drift, had tea with us in the camper, and then Mom and I walked in with them, showed them the almost finished Red-throated Loon painting, and then we went together to the blind. Mom had brought her video camera, and we were all looking forward to seeing the chick being fed, as Tom and Sheila had described to us how it is done. The male was on the nest when we arrived, at 11:00, and the female was preening and napping a little piece off on the lake, so Mom and I were left alone to paint and photograph. It was cloudy with a cool south wind. We watched the female take off, low, like a seaplane, when she left to catch fish in the sea. She took off in an easterly direction, but Tom says they circle around above the lake and go west to Masset Inlet. I filled in moss and cranberry detail in watercolour, and after a while we saw two people with the husky, Skaya close between them, picking their way along the shore just across from us. They returned around 15:00, and helped me pack up the dome tent, which I hadn't used to paint an 'alternate painting' of the bog from, because the weather has been so fine. Back at the blind, we watched the female, who had returned with a small perch, try to get the chick to eat it,

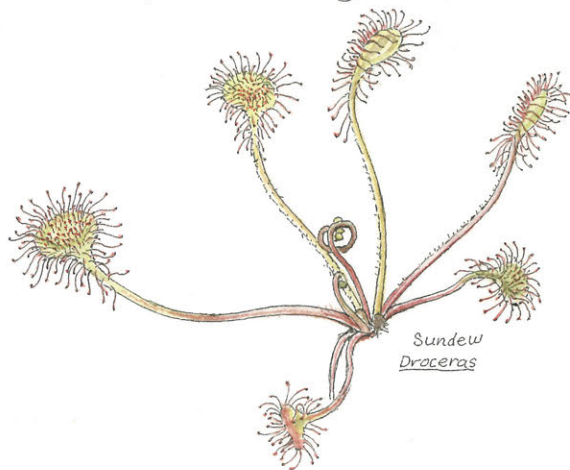
7 June 1990
Drizzle Lake,
Graham Island,
Queen Charlottes.

but its body was too wide, and the wee one kept dropping it. The female would have gone back to catch another fish (she eventually had to eat the 'too big' one herself) after teasing the chick a bit to see if it were still hungry, but there was an eagle scare, during which the chick hopped off the nest and tried to hide around its edges, while its parents were out farther, calling, and afterward, the female returned to the nest and called the chick up with her, so the male was left to go fishing. After about a half an hour, he returned with a large sand lance, which is the appropriate shape, but this one was too long for the chick to be able to keep down. After everyone had left to walk out, at about 16:00, we had a serious eagle scare. The parents were both calling and worrying, close to the nest. The chick jumped off, but then climbed back on, and one parent returned, with neck snaked out low, and persuaded it to leave. I couldn't see any eagle in the sky, or perched on trees, but the fuss continued, and the chick dove several times for three or four seconds. It was so buoyant that its little legs had to churn quite vigorously to get its body under at all. Then I saw the eagle — standing on the beach just across the bay to the west of us, the end of the lake. Then I saw it fly straight toward us, so I slipped around in front of the blind and shook cedar branches and shouted in a low voice, "Swam! Go away!" and it swerved just

before reaching the loons and flew off toward the cabin. I ran after it a little way, out into the open, and shouted louder, waving my arms. It rose and turned, and flew back across the lake. Then all was peaceful, as the male and chick went to the nest, and after a while the female went off for fish. She returned at 19:00 with a nice little sand lance, which was eaten promptly by the chick, which then just as promptly clambered back up with its father. At about 19:15 the female came to the nest again, and the male got off — a change of duty. It would now be his turn to fly for food. But the family swam about a little first, contentedly enjoying themselves and their chick, keeping close to the nest, not much farther than a metre away. I sketched the chick. Then just as I was getting settled in to paint again, I heard three whirs in quick succession, and then another, frantic with the beating of wings, and as soon as I could stand up to see through a gap in the blind, I saw the eagle, an adult, rise from the water, very close to the adult parent loons, with the little dark chick in its great yellow talons. The adult loons made no more cries. It was done. As I packed up, shaken, feeling so helpless and sorry, I remembered seeing my little child Elsa, an only child, taken just as swiftly, and with just as little warning. As I left, the pair were quiet by the nest. They had said "coo oow" a few times, but stopped. As I walked out from the cabin, I heard a few loud calls, in unison.

8 June 1990 Drizzle Lake, Graham Island,
Queen Charlottes, B.C.

"Kuckie, kuckie, Kuckie. Klaaow, Klaaow, Kluk. Eeeek." A Raven woke me at 07:30, saying the same prattling commentary — at least with the same vocabulary, as one that I stopped to listen to on my way across the bog to the Lake of the day before yesterday. It was holding forth with another that I could faintly hear across the open bog toward the highway, making the same varied and rather tuneful sounds, and it was so absorbed in this that I passed quite close before stopping, and the Raven carried right on. All its feathers hung loose and random — throat feathers, breast + flank feathers, and even its backfeathers seemed rather haphazard. Its wings were folded, but with every little sound, it moved them out from its sides a bit. After a few minutes, during which I stood entranced, wishing I could understand Raven language, it flew to a stunted pine, close on the other side of me, and continued the same discourse, but facing me instead of its companion across the bog.



Sundew
Drosera



Starflower
Trientalis

I have been so wrapped up in making account of the Loons that I have neglected to describe other lives and happenings. I had visitors to the cedar grove in which the blind was built, as I sat and painted for eight days. I watched a little Brown Creeper gleaning the cedar trunks, and every day a tiny winter wren rustled about in the Salal very near me, catching insects for its brood somewhere. The cedars are flanked by a couple of Red Alder trees, with dark-lenticled white bark, and these were visited by a very solid-looking Yellowbellied Sapsucker, with a Windsor Red head, extending in a cape, down to its white-blazed black wings. It didn't drum or hammer, but only poked and pryed the bark, and flaked the bark of a pine as well. A Chickaree squirrel investigated the blind for food twice while I was in it, but I kept track of my bag of oats + nuts. I think the Chickaree uttered those hickupping shrieks in the woods when I asked myself, "what was that bird?" Yesterday I saw a flotilla of eight geese in the small bay, not far from the Loon nest. Tom says that one spring they hung around all during the Loons' incubation, and one even sat on the Loons' platform,

right beside the female Redthroat. But it seems that this year, or perhaps since a chick has hatched, there is little tolerance of close neighbours, as twice yesterday, the female loon scared the geese away. Once we saw the peacefully cruising flock of Canadas proceeding east a hundred metres or so off shore, and then they exploded into honking flight, and there, in the midst of where they had been, bobbed the Loon. Tonight after supper with Reimchans, they showed us a segment of video that they had taken of a small flock of Common Loons being attacked by a Redthroated Loon, from beneath, and played a frame at a time, we saw ~~the~~ one of the trespassers being bumped up out of the water, and up came the Redthroat's

head and neck, as if flexed, as if it had butted rather than poked the unsuspecting bird. Perhaps if the female hadn't been so aggressive toward her neighbours yesterday, the geese may have been able to alert the loons to the eagle's presence.

Other interspecific relations — on June 5th, a Buck Mule Deer came into the open gravel pit to see what Jennifer was, as she played in the sun beside the camper. Pepper poodle, who was also outside, saw the buck's cautious approach, and barked, and the buck turned and left. Dad has been out hunting nearly every day, and has not even seen a deer, let alone a buck, though we saw deer on the highway to Masset.

It rained steadily this morning, and I was glad that I brought everything out from the cabin and blind last night. I completed the mossy nest platform and water reflection this morning, with my board propped on the camper's steering wheel, and then went out in the rain to collect plants for this page. There was wonderful surf in Tleil, and we saw a dead adult male sea lion on the beach.

