



## ORNITHOLOGY

### A Pacific Diver in Brittany in 2015 ?

5<sup>th</sup> February 2026

By Philippe J. Dubois

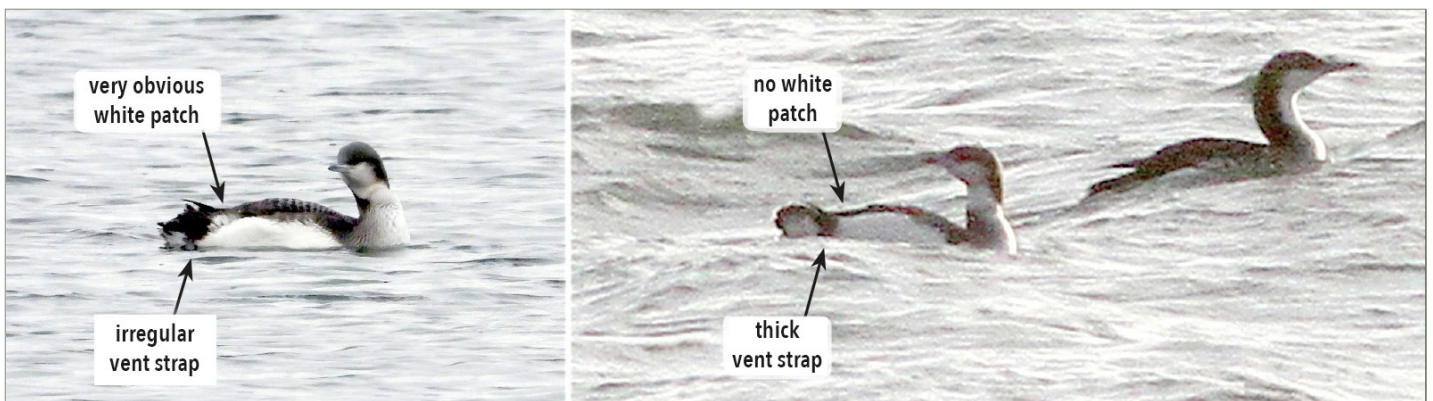


1. Black-throated and Pacific Diver (right), Brittany, December 2015 (© Élise Rousseau). The head profile and bill length of the Pacific Diver are very different from those of the Black-throated Diver. Note also that it swims with its body very deep in the water.

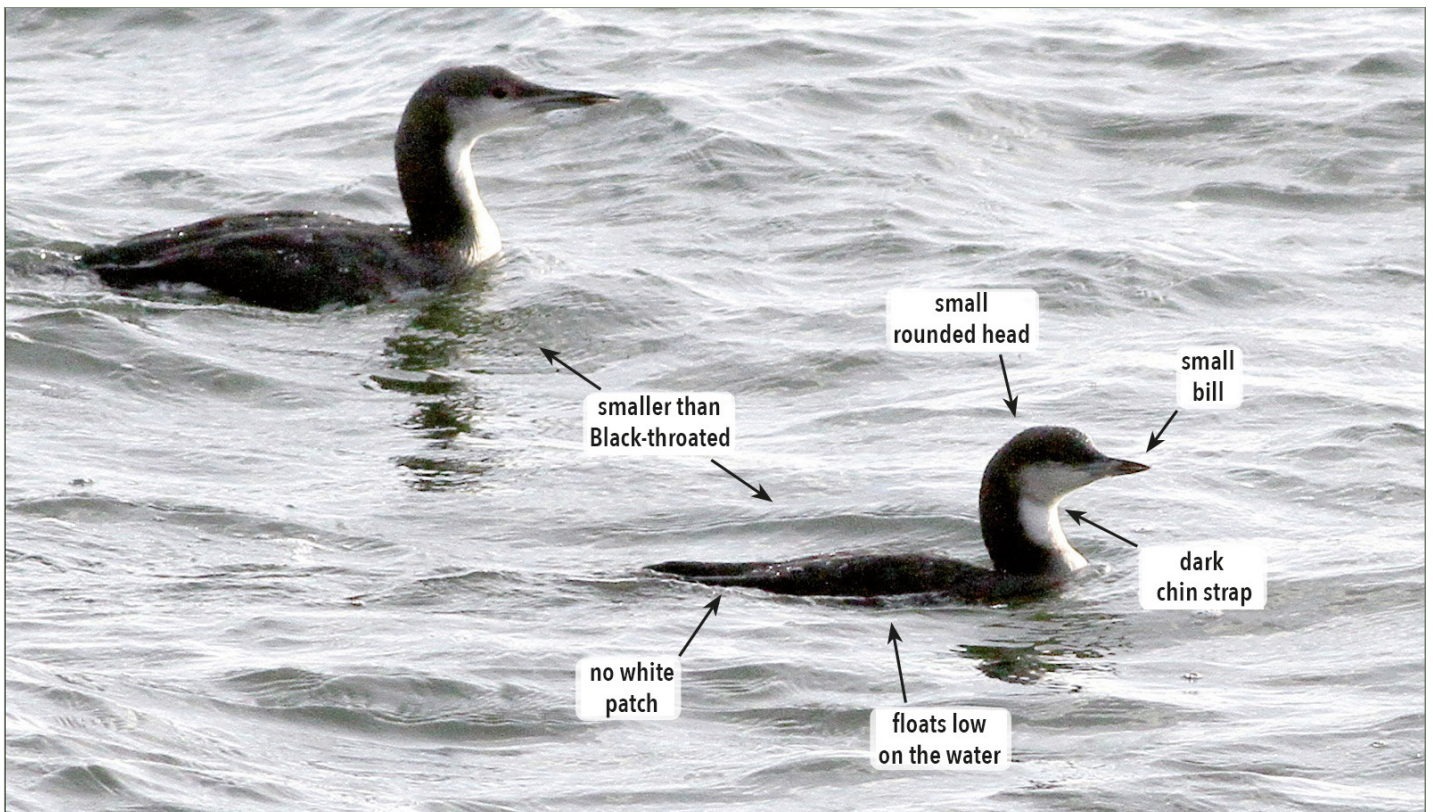
On 6<sup>th</sup> December 2015, accompanied by Élise Rousseau, we observed the area around Pointe de Bindy, in the commune of Logonna-Daoulas (Finistère), Brittany, looking in particular for divers and grebes that regularly winter in this area. At midday, we found a loose group of eight Black-throated Divers (*Gavia arctica*) fishing not far from the shore, on a sea dotted with small waves (moderate to fairly strong westerly wind). Among them, I clearly distinguish with my binoculars a bird slightly smaller than the others, with a rounder silhouette, particularly around the head, a shorter bill and a more smoky head than the three Black-throated Divers closest to it. Intrigued, I examined the bird in detail with my telescope, while Élise took a few photos. The small group, no doubt pushed by the current, gradually moved away from the coast, diving for food, and arrived in an area where the light was a little less good. Already quite far away, the birds stopped for a moment to preen themselves, then drifted off again and disappeared behind the Bindy Islands.

However, I had enough time to get a good look at this intriguing bird. I therefore note the following characteristics in the field:

- Smaller than Black-throated Diver accompanying it. Regardless of the angle, this characteristic is consistent and makes it easy to spot the bird, even from a distance.
- Slightly stockier, more compact silhouette, less tapered than Black-throated Diver.
- Head significantly rounder, particularly at the nape and top of the skull, and less elongated.
- Bill shorter (by about 10-15%), perhaps slightly upturned.
- Pale half-moon under the eye.
- Ear-coverts more grey than in Black-throated Diver (but variable depending on the light).
- Thin chin strap (more or less visible depending on the lighting).
- No white patch visible on the rear of the bird's flanks in the field; bird often very deep in the water.
- Fairly thick black line on the lower belly ('vent strap'), visible when the bird was preening.



2. Left : Black-throated Diver, Belgium, January 2026 (© Jeremiusz Trzaska) and right : Pacific Diver (left) with a Black-throated Diver, Brittany, December 2015 (© Élise Rousseau). The Pacific Diver has a fairly thick vent strap and a straight, unbroken line between dark upperparts and white flanks, lacking the white patch of Black-throated Diver.



3. Black-throated and Pacific Diver (right), Brittany, December 2015 (© Élise Rousseau). Compared to Black-throated Diver, Pacific shows a clear difference in structure, with a round head, shorter neck, thinner and shorter bill, and less angular head profile, and you can see a pale half-moon under the eye and the dark (dark grey) chin strap.

All these criteria therefore point to a Pacific Diver. Having seen (and photographed) quite a few individuals of this species in South Korea in the winter of 2013 (i.e. in winter plumage), I really feel that this is a Pacific Diver. In South Korea, the two species were sometimes mixed together, but you could tell at first glance which was which because their overall silhouettes are quite different.

## Discussion

Back home, I contacted several people to share my observation and get their opinions.

Thibaut Chansac replied that '*it looks very good*', but regretted that I had not been able to see the bird's undertail coverts or see it in flight. In fact, the undertail coverts are clearly visible in plate 2, where the bird is preening itself.

Similarly, Hugo Touzé, then secretary of the French Rarities Committee (CHN), wrote to me: '*No problem for me, it's an adult Pacific Diver! I have nothing to add, all the elements you mention are OK. The size, the general structure of the bird, the shape and length of the beak, the plumage = EVERYTHING is OK and "typical" for me.*' Hugo nevertheless forwarded the photos to several people, whose responses are as follows.

Pierre-André Crochet: '*I just don't see how it could be a Black-throated Diver. For me, it's a Pacific Diver. In the photo where it is turning, you can clearly see the regular line along the sides with no spots on the back. The "vent strap" is wide and continuous. The structure and shape of the beak are very typical of the Pacific Diver. The same goes for the very dark cheek.*'

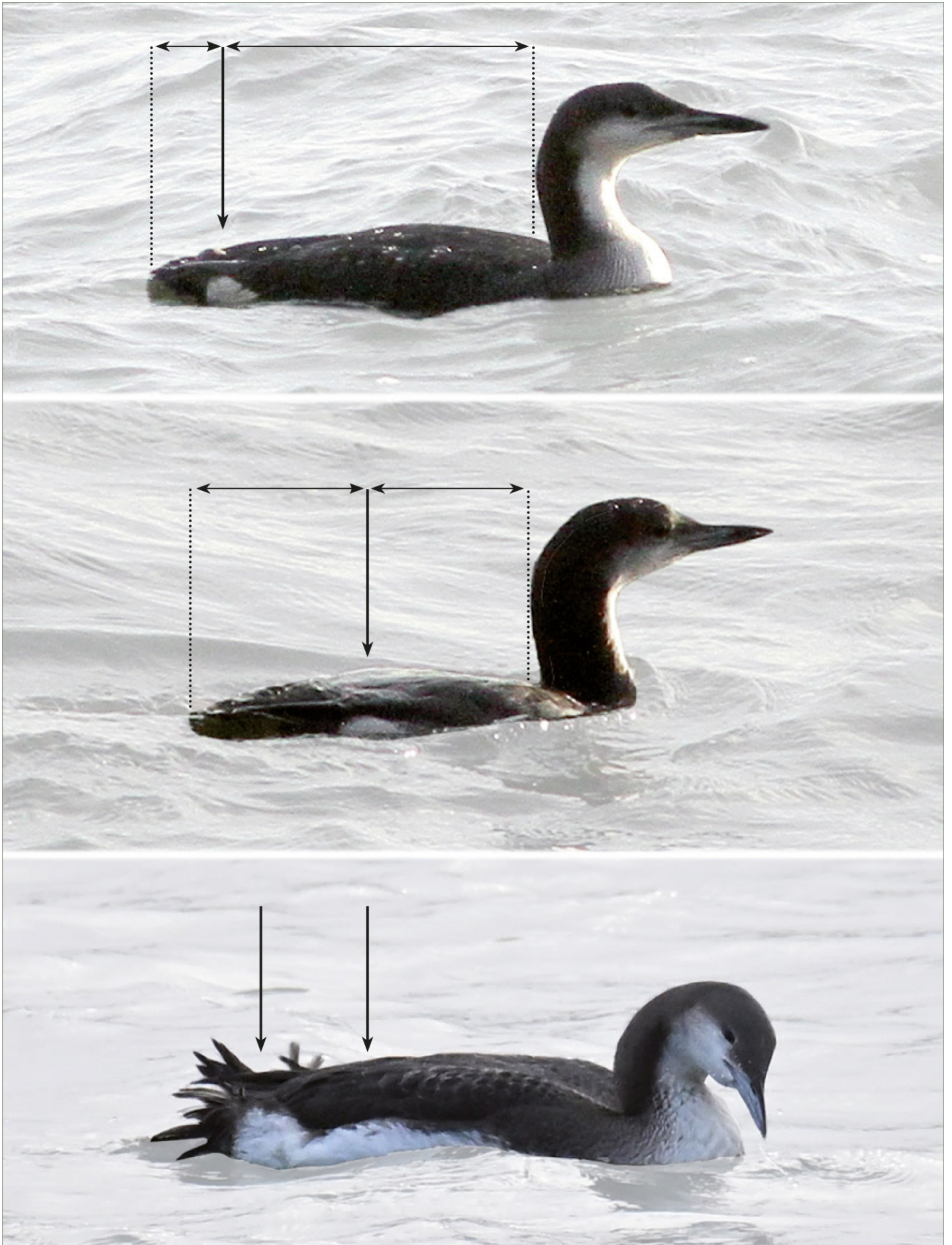
Frédéric Jiguet: '*I agree with all the pro-Pacific criteria, but I don't see a good photo that really shows the flanks; the bird is very low on the water in the four photos I've seen, and in one photo, there appears to be white. When it turns to clean itself, we should see a patch on a Black-throated Diver, and the vent strap is very thick.*' There is a contradiction in this response, as FJ says that we cannot see the flanks, but he mentions a thick 'vent strap', which is visible when the bird shows its flanks clearly (plate 2).

Daniel Lopez Velasco (Spanish RC): '*I understand the doubts regarding the ID of this bird. A number of features definitely point towards the bird being a Pacific, and what seems to be a complete dark band across the vent is of course very good for Pacific, however if that white visible on those 2 shots is indeed white, then I don't think the bird can be ID as Pacific. It is true that Pacifics can show white along the flanks but as far as I know and also recalling my experience with the species (in Asia and North America) they never show obvious and isolated white in the "anterior thigh" area, as Black-throated Diver does, and as this bird seems to show, just where a Black-throated Diver would show it.*'

In a photo, white can indeed be seen on the flanks of this diver, but it is not located where it is visible in Black-throated Diver. In Black-throated Diver, the white oval is positioned very far back, while the white visible on this Pacific Loon is located almost in the centre of the flanks, as shown in the following montage (plate 4). It should also be noted that, depending on the position, white can be seen on the flanks of some Pacific Loons, mainly in the middle of the body, as in the Brittany bird (plate 5).

Finally, Josh Jones (BirdGuides): '*For me it is unquestionable on size, structure and the plumage features we can see. The bird looks absolutely perfect for a Pacific...*'

In 2020, after looking at my photos again and comparing them with those I had taken in Asia in winter, I sent them to American ornithologist Steve Howell, whose response was: '*It does look like a Pacific Loon but from these images I can't be 100% certain; it would be nice to see the flanks more clearly. The other bird is obviously*



4. From top to bottom: Black-throated Diver, Brittany, December 2015 (© Élise Rousseau), Pacific Diver, Brittany, December 2015 (© Élise Rousseau) and Black-throated Diver, Channel coast, December 2025 (© Marc Roca) . In Black-throated Diver, the white patch extends high up and is located at the rear of the flanks, in contact with the uppertail-coverts and undertail-coverts, while the white visible here in the Pacific Diver is much further forward and corresponds to the feathers on the flanks, which are ruffled and extend somewhat upwards. The white visible on the two upper divers can be clearly seen on the Black-throated Diver below.



5. Pacific Divers showing white on flanks (top, Tennessee, December 2024, © Eric Bodker [left] and California, May 2018, © Jamie Baker; bottom, Canada, October 2022, © Aubrey Robson [left] and Canada, December 2023, © Amanda Guercio). Note that the white on the flanks of these individuals, unlike in Black-throated Diver, does not form a regular patch and is located halfway between the rear and the middle of the flanks.

a Black-throated Loon and would look very distinct in California, but the presumed Pacific would not stand out here as anything other than a Pacific'. SH therefore writes that he could not distinguish this bird from a Pacific Loon in the United States, but he also regrets that the flanks are not visible. Let us recall once again that: 1) the white patch on the rear of the flanks was not seen on this bird in the field, and 2) it is also not visible when the bird is preening (plate 2). However, in this position, we should see a white break at the rear of the flanks and not a straight line without a white notch. It was because, in addition to the criteria observed, we did not see any white on the flanks that we took photos of this surprising diver. Looking at photos on the Internet, we can see that when it cleans itself, the Black-throated Diver does indeed have a white break at the rear of the flanks (plate 2).

## Conclusion

Ultimately, it would be incredible for a Black-throated Diver to have the same size, black belly strap, dark chin strap, skull shape, beak and structure as a Pacific Diver... Especially since, according to the literature on species identification, the criteria used are not particularly complex (Birch & Lee 1995, 1997, Mullarney & Millington 2008, Mather 2010, Ammitzboell *et al.* 2017). This is why, since its first appearance in the Western Palearctic in 2010, the species has been mentioned more than 70 times (fig. 1, Duquet 2025).

The bird observed on 6 December 2015 in Logonna-Daoulas (Finistère), Brittany, displayed all the characteristics expected for the species, and we therefore consider it to be a Pacific Diver. The discovery of another Pacific Diver in Penvénan (Côtes d'Armor) on 17 January 2026 convinced me to publish the details of the December 2015 observation, as these two individuals would then constitute the first French records of the species.



fig. 1. Location of the two French records of Pacific Diver and distribution of Western Palearctic data (2007–2025 period), to which a few new observations in the British Isles and Norway have been added since the beginning of winter (from Duquet 2025, modified).



6. Pacific Diver, Brittany, December 2015 (© Élise Rousseau)

**References :** • Ammitzboell N.P., Werner S., Marques S.W. & Schweizer M. (2017). Pacific Loon at Silvanersee, Switzerland, in December 2015, with notes on genetics, identification and WP records. *Dutch Birding* 39 : 228-238. • Birch A. & Lee C.T. (1995). Identification of Pacific Diver, a potential vagrant to Europe. *Birding World* 8 : 458-466. • Birch A. & Lee C.T. (1997). Arctic and Pacific Loons: field identification. *Birding* 29 : 106-115. • Duquet M. (2025). Le Plongeon du Pacifique : où et quand ? *Post-Ornithos* 2 : e2025.02.23. • Mather J.R. (2010). Pacific Diver in Yorkshire: new to Britain and the Western Palearctic. *British Birds* 103 : 539-545. • Mullarney K. & Millington R. (2008). The Pacific and Black-throated Divers in Pembrokeshire. *Birding World* 21 : 63-66.

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