

1998 Loon Watch

By Donna Love

Ice-off was early in 1998, much earlier than the previous year, so it seemed like we waited a long time for our loons to return. However, we saw our first loon on April 18, which is around the usual time. It was a male as it could yodel, a call made only by male loons. Now he needed a partner.



Lynn Kelly, wildlife biologist in charge of Loon protection in Montana was worried

about our loons this year. Large numbers of them had been

displaced from their regular winter feeding ground on the Pacific Coast due to El Nino's warmer than usual water temperatures and they were dying from lack of food, so we worried about our returning female. Finally on April 29 another smaller loon appeared and the loons began to display courtship behavior, swimming, diving, preening and resting together.

On May 23 one loon was finally seen nesting on a small island in the backwater's of Seeley Lake. This was the first day of Seeley Lake's Loon and Fish Festival which gave the loon tours, lead by Lynn Kelly, a special treat of being the first to view the nest. Due to lower water levels, the nest site was far to the south of the viewing blind and harder to see than last year, but still visible. The lateness of the season was some cause for concern. Loons incubate their eggs for 28 days and the chicks would need the balance of the summer to mature significantly before the fall migration. Only time would tell if the chicks would survive.

Nesting Loon

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SITTING DUCKS

Loons need an area of at least 140 yards of undisturbed area around their nest to successfully incubate their two eggs. When nesting loons are disturbed they lower their heads to the ground over the side of the nest. If the disturbance comes too close the loon will slide off the nest. The presence of some animals did not disturb the nesting loons. A variety of coots, ducks, a Canada goose family with six chicks, and a sandhill crane family with two chicks all moved near and around the nest without the loons showing signs of distress. One day a whitetail doe and fawn even grazed 12 feet away and the loon stayed on the nest.

Seeley Lake's bald eagles occasionally bothered the nest. Nesting loons are, after all, like sitting ducks to the eagles, but Seeley's nest is not likely to have human disturbance. It is fortunate that in 1897, over 100 years ago, three quarters of the lake became a part of the National Forest System. This has insured that, with

the exception of the administrative site, Seeley's natural northern shoreline and the loon's habitat have remained undisturbed. Private ownership and its associated development might have threatened this.

Another factor for low human disturbance of the nest site is that the lake's backwaters that are completely surrounded by a thick wall of willows. The Loon Nesting Sanctuary sign put across the only open channel deters conscientious fishermen. If humans disturb loons, the loons raise their chests straight up out of the water and beat the water with their wings. This is called their "penguin" dance, which is their most anxious behavior. If you see a loon doing this, move away. You are too close.

On June 7 during her regular loon checks, Lynn found two chicks on Alva and Rainy lakes. This was good news, but she expressed concern for Salmon Lake. Like Seeley, Salmon's pair had nested late. Salmon's nest is on the northwestern corner of the lake on some cattails that sit along the shoreline with no natural barriers. Buoys were placed around the nest, but even then watercraft sometimes went within the half circle formed by the buoys. On one occasion canoers paddled near the nest. The loons left the nest and from a short distance away were calling and calling. MWFP can issue sign violation citations and last year on Salmon issued several warnings to canoers, fishermen and wave runners. The loon nesting signs are only in for nesting season, about 4 weeks. After the signs are removed, loons move around the lake to feed and rest and signs are removed.

But Salmon's worst disturbance came not from humans, but from the bald eagles. They were never successful at capturing the loons, but day after day they harassed the loons, trying to get them to leave the nest so they could eat their eggs. Lynn and others are beginning to feel that the introduction of pike to Salmon Lake in 1996 may be causing the eagles hunger. Pike eat everything in a lake. Eagles on other lakes that don't have pike have never bothered the loons to the extent that Salmon's eagle pair have in the past couple years. Salmon's loons haven't produced chicks since 1995.

OVERDUE DATE

Back at Seeley Lake, it was drawing near to the hatch date. On the morning of June 20, one loon was sitting motionless on the water just outside the backwaters. A tiny black loon chick perched on its back. At the nest site, a loon was still in the nest. Loon chicks hatch one day apart so we expected another chick to hatch the next day. We waited that day and the next and the next. Four days passed before both adults were seen in the lake nursery area caring for just one chick. Lynn was disappointed, but said that since the birds were off the nest, we could go to the nest and retrieve eggshells or the other egg. It would be used for research.

On June 30, my husband, Tim and I paddled a canoe to the nest site. Tim found the other egg lying just off the back of the nest. The loons must have accidentally pushed the egg there during incubation. If nesting loons are startled off the nest, their large webbed feet can thrust an egg off the nest when they flee. Lynn told us it was unusual for the nesting pair to have waited so long to abandon it, so it must have been fairly well along before it dyed. We took the egg home and put it in our freezer to give to Lynn the next time she came through. It was tested for menthol-mercury levels, but was found to have normal levels.

At Salmon, both loons left the nest on June 28. They did not have chicks. We wanted to visit the nest, but couldn't get away.

FAMILY MATTERS

July 4th dawned rainy and cool, which kept boating to a minimum. The lower water levels forced the loons to take their chick to the lake right way. On June 9, when the chick was three weeks old we saw our chick making shallow dives. At this time last year, the Montana Loon Society was banding chicks around the lake, but due to funding no banding would take place this year. Results from the previous year's banding were beginning to show interesting results. The most recent finding was that only 20-30% (one out of every three chicks) survived their first winter on the ocean to return to Montana. And we still don't know where our loons spend the winter.

July 18 was Loon Day, a day when volunteers go to area lakes to count loons. On July 17, Lynn gave a "Forest Service Fireside Chat" at Big Larch Campground about loons. If you ever have a chance to attend one of her talks, do. They are informative and fun. The next morning, loon watchers across the state began their annual loon count. Tim and I zipped around Seeley Lake in our little boat and counted our three at the north end (dad, mom and chick) then we looked for loons on the rest of the lake, but didn't see any. On that day, 218 loons were counted on 72 lakes. 175 were adults and 43 chicks. This was the first time for the count to go over 200 loons since 1986 when the census began.

For the rest of the summer, we occasionally saw two other loons on our lake. Our loon male was a good host, visiting them, swimming and diving with them. Not only did he entertain them, he also left the lake frequently. We suppose this was because there was only one chick. In previous years, with two chicks, he was greatly needed.

August was hot and boating was heavy. The loon chick and mother rarely wandered out of the nursery area except in the early morning when they would swim down the eastern shore a ways and then back by ten o'clock. One morning, I watched as an early morning water skier nearly creamed the chick with its ski as the driver of the boat saw the loons too late and swerved, pulling the skier directly over the chick. The chick was unharmed as far as I could tell. It is important to say here that my family and I have spent many hours on the lake knee boarding, skiing, tubing and swimming. However, we have noticed that wildlife use the lake shore most in the morning and evening, so we play in the middle of the day, in the middle of the lake.

This year we also experienced a new kind of disturbance. People with boats regularly found a quiet lakeshore spot and totally set up housekeeping, unloading from their boats, beach umbrellas, BBQ grills, coolers, blankets, towels, toy sand buckets, floating tubes and mattresses - you name it, they had it. And they stayed for hours. Thankfully, the loon's nursery area has mucky, water lily filled, willow-lined shoreline kept beach partiers away.

Peace and Quiet

September brought the end of summer and the start of school with one last hoo-ra on Labor Day weekend. It dawned smoky from forest fires, so the weekend was short. After that, the loons and the eagle with her two chicks, had the lake to themselves. The loon chick could catch its own fish now and the female often left it alone while it slept and she fed. I noticed that it could lie on the water as flat as a big brown water lily leaf camouflaged from the eagles. But one day, the eagle mama tried to catch the chick and her mother. Tired of the repeated attacks, the loon mother took off running across the lake and took off in flight. The chick hesitated only a heartbeat before it executed a perfect running take-off, lifted off into the air and landed

beside the female some distance down the lake. It was ready to migrate. It dawned on me that we hadn't seen the male since Labor Day. He had already flown the coop, so to speak.

September 19 was the annual meeting of the Montana Loon Society. That's when people all over the state that had fallen under the spell of the loon meet to discuss the loon year and plan for the future. Each area had its own problems. The northwestern corner of the state was feeling the trauma of the downsizing of the timber and mining industries. It wasn't a good time to try to introduce more conservation laws to them. The Flathead was experiencing the problems associated with human growth making it important to watch growth on lakes and lakeshores. The Thompson Falls area was making progress on no-wake lakes less than thirty acres. Glacier Park had begun an early type of Citizen's Science and was beginning to count loons. The Seeley-Swan was growing in recreation use and needed a better sign management and education program.

All of this led to the beginning development and discussion to start a Common Loon Working Group composed of representatives from state, federal, industry, and individuals to monitor Montana's loons in an organized way.

On September 26, we took our boat for one last spin around the lake before taking it out of the water. A pair of grebes was swimming by the Seeley Lake Campground northern beach. As we drew near, we saw that it wasn't a pair of grebes it was our loon adult and chick. The parent had lost its black and white breeding plumage and had turned a dull gray. The chick, still gray, resembled the adult in color and size. Without the boating traffic of the summer, they were utilizing the whole lake. We saw them one last time on the evening of October 24 on the northern part of the lake. Loons migrate sometime around the fall equinox, September 21. Our loons probably stayed longer because their nesting was late and it had been a warm autumn. The chick looked strong and sure and ready to take on winter on the ocean.