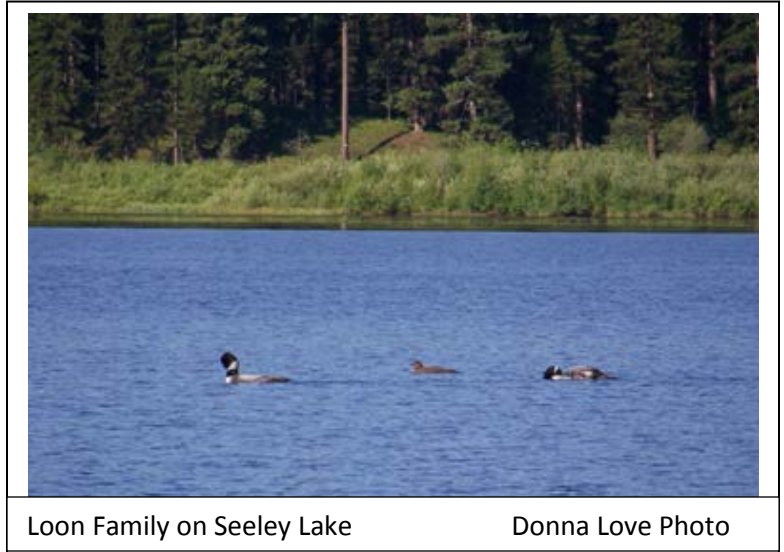


2001 Loon Watch

By Donna Love

A loud crack from outside awakened us, followed by another and another. My husband, Tim and I groaned. We knew that sound. We had heard it twice before. Once when we lived in Choteau about ten years ago and around twenty-five years ago in Missoula. It was the sound of large tree limbs snapping under the weight of a heavy late spring snowfall. Winter snow doesn't break tree limbs the size of fence posts. Trees are



Loon Family on Seeley Lake

Donna Love Photo

weaker in spring when the sap is flowing, and leafed out branches hold more snow. Our family wasn't in any immediate danger, but the yard was a mess in the morning. Seven inches of wet snow had fallen overnight and tree branches were strewn everywhere. The roads were impassible and the power was out. We built a fire and hunkered down to warm up. It wasn't until after breakfast that I thought of them – My mind did a freeze frame still shot of their nest as I thought, "The Loons!"

Loons are fish-eating, black and white diving birds that winter on the coast and summer on inland fresh-water lakes. About 200 common loons spend their summer in Montana. Most are found north of Missoula and west of the continental divide. The Clearwater River Drainage in the Seeley Lake area has six lakes suitable for nesting loons, including Salmon, Placid, Seeley, Inez, Alva and Rainy, but only four are used. Inez last had nesting loons in 1979 when Plum Creek Timber Company sold the land they owned on the south side of the lake to a landowner who later subdivided until cabins encircle the south end and took over the loon nest area. Salmon last had nesting loons in 1997. The illegal introduction of pike in 1996 is thought to be the reason for loss of loons on Salmon. Either pike fishermen kept fishing near the nest, or pike ate too many of the other fish like land locked salmon and perch that are just the right size for a loon.

However, when the snowstorm struck, our loons on Seeley Lake had been on their nest for two weeks. In Montana every loon chick is important. After their first summer they spend two years on the ocean before returning to their natal lake to take their place in the nesting chain of life, but new research has revealed that only 1/3 of the loon chicks hatched survive their first two years on the ocean. So when we have nesting loons, every chick that hatches becomes the future of loons in the state.

SPRING TIME IN THE ROCKIES

Loons return to Montana in April when the lakes thaw. In 2001 ice-off was late. On April 21 eight loons congregated at the north end of Salmon Lake waiting to move north to their nesting lakes. Loons arrived on Seeley on April 25, but they didn't stay. On April 27, a warm strong wind broke Seeley's thinning ice into a thousand tiny shreds. That morning the lake surface glistened, a silver solid. By evening the lake was a shiny, wavy blue. On April 29 our loons arrived to stay.

Until bandings began in 1997, we didn't know where our loons spent the winter. After that our female was spotted off the northern coast of California at Morrow Bay, the Alva female was spotted off the coast near California, and a chick from Placid Lake was found dead on the Snake River, confirming that our loons follow large bodies of water west to the Pacific Ocean to winter in Northern California.

When our loons returned they set up housekeeping in the backwaters on May 14. A loon's legs are so far back on their body that a loon has a hard time walking on land so it nests on land close to water. If danger gets within 140 yards of nest the bird slides off and enters the water where it can better protect itself. This leaves the eggs exposed. If the loon is off the nest too long, predators may eat the eggs. Weather can also harm the eggs. Left alone for too long in the cold eggs may freeze. On too hot a day, eggs may cook. Our loons are mostly left alone, though fishermen sometimes disregard the loon nesting signs and slip into the backwaters. However, in 2001, the loons were able to nest, so on the day of the heavy snow, I raced off to see how the loons were. On the way I saw that the bald eagle nest was damaged. Half of it hung off the back of the nest like a children's playground slide. However, when I arrived at the loon nest, the loon was still there, surrounded by snow while its mate swam near by. Both looked agitated and alert, but they had not abandoned their post.

Loon Ranger, Tim Dykstra and I visited the other nests that afternoon. Alva was the only nest under trees, but every nest was good shape. The only nest we couldn't get to due to downed limbs was Placid Lake, but when Tim was able to get there, that nest was fine, too, and later hatched two chicks. The adult pair on Placid had been banded in 1997 and it is fun to see them return to the lake each year. Loons don't mate for life – they marry the lake. That summer, Rainy also had two chicks. The loon ranger in our area also watches loons in Ovando, which are mostly on private land and don't need the same type management as the Clearwater with its many public lakes. That year the Ovando area had four chicks on three lakes.

On June 12 and 13 two chicks hatched on Seeley Lake. On June 17, my daughter and I paddled into the backwaters to gather eggshells to be tested for toxins. We found a few large pieces of shell and both egg sacs. An egg sac is a thin, white, balloon like membrane that protects the chick from outside bacteria that could enter the egg. One egg sac was still on the nest and one was in the water just a short distance away. We scooped it up in our fishing net. The loon parents remove the first egg sac from the nest shortly after the first chick has hatched. If it was left on the nest, it might attract predators by its smell. The second egg sac they don't bother with since the loons leave the nest after the second chick is hatched and never go back.

Eggs themselves are remarkable. They are made to withstand a great deal of weight, yet are fragile enough for a tiny, weak chick to break out. This happens as the shell is made of tiny microscopic wedge-shaped pieces that fit tightly together much like the wedge shape bricks at the top of a Roman arch. The Roman's long ago discovered that this wedge-shape effect could hold a great deal more weight than a straight across rock, so

they built their temples and aqueducts using what we now call the “Roman arch.” Well, eggs were designed this way first, and it makes the egg strong from the outside. Like breaking an egg to make an omelet, it would take a strong smack to break a loon egg from the outside. But when it is time to hatch, the egg is easily broken from within. The chick uses its egg tooth, a little pointed bump on the tip of its bill to chip the egg open from inside, slowly turning a full circle inside the shell, until – pop! – off comes the top. The egg tooth slowly disappears as the chick grows.

HERE A CHICK, THERE A CHICK...

Once hatched, the chicks aren't without difficulties. The eagles made a grab for our loon chicks on June 20, but it was defeated by the diligent loon parents. But I can't feel too bad about the eagles trying to take a loon chick. They are just trying to feed their babies, too. Later, one eagle chick was seen hopping around in the damaged eagle nest, so at least one survived the heavy snowfall.

A loon chick, like most baby animals, grows fast. When it first hatches it wears a sooty dark-gray coat of down. Then it changes to a thicker coat of brown downy feathers. At four weeks it is about half the size of the adults. Finally, at around 11 weeks it grows its contour feathers that cover its body and its first set of flight and tail feathers. Then it begins to take short flights that land in crash landings. Finally, it is mature enough to migrate to the ocean in late fall.

Only one thing happened through that summer that I hadn't seen before. The eagle was harassing one of our adult loons (probably the male) that was carrying a fairly large fish back to its mate and chick. I thought at first that the eagle was trying to catch the loon, which I thought was really ridiculous since a loon weighs up to 12 pounds and an eagle only 4 pounds. However, the eagle swooped down time after time and each time the loon dove and came back up with the fish, but finally the loon grew tired, dropped the fish and swam away underwater coming up near its mate empty billed. The eagle swooped down and grabbed the fish.

In July the Loon Day count resulted in 196 loons being counted on 184 Montana lakes by 94 volunteers. That's not bad when you consider the first annual count began in 1986 with just one person.

The rest of the summer passed in a haze of smoke resulting from a bad fire season. On August 11, a Level 5 Forest Service closure shut down area campgrounds leaving our lakes quieter than they had ever been before. A Level 5 closure can result if all the fire fighters and equipment are already tied up by so many fires that they can't risk another one starting. The loons probably appreciated the break. When the smoke cleared it was autumn and the chicks had grown their flight feathers. They began their flying lessons and the Loon Ranger was back at school, too.

OH, THE WEATHER OUTSIDE IS FRIGHTFUL

We had had such an early start to loon season and Rainy Lake didn't nest until late, so I visited Rainy Lake on September 21 to see how they were doing. It was a cold blustery day with snow showers. (I'm sure firefighters all over Montana were happy to see snow arrive early.) One adult and the two chicks were still on the lake. I watched the adult take off flying. It circled the lake over and over, calling the whole time. Even when I could no longer see her I could still hear her. In answer, the chicks tried to fly, running and running across the lake, but they couldn't get airborne. After a short time the adult returned to the lake. It is thought that loon parents begin their migration early before the chicks and that the chicks eventually follow other

loons from further north on their migration route. I doubt this theory. The adult male does leave early, but I have always seen at least one adult with the chick or chicks on Seeley Lake up until the time all have left. I returned to Rainy Lake on Oct. 3 and all three birds were gone. They had made it.

Now it is time to get ready for the next loon season. It is always a fun filled time with lots of fun things happening and lots of fun things to learn and experience. Have a great winter.