

## **Get the Lead (and Fishing Tackle) Out**

### **2006 Loon Watch**

**By Donna Love**

Have you ever seen a common loon hanging upside down, swinging by its foot from a wad of fishing line caught on a tree fifteen feet in the air?

Neither have we, but we thought we were going to last year (2006), when we received the call for help from distressed campers at Alva Lake.

Turns out it was a western grebe. How it got in the tree is anyone's guess. It might have caught the line around its foot in the lake, and later caught it on a branch as it flew by. Or perhaps some hapless angler caught the line in the tree and the grebe flew into it. Either way, it's never dull being a loon watcher. (We weren't able to rescue the grebe in time. It was mobbed by ravens and died.)

With more and more fishermen on our lakes, fishing line and lures are causing more and more problems. It is well known that hundreds of tons of lead fishing tackle are deposited in marine and freshwaters annually in the U.S. and Canada, usually through the loss of sinkers and jigs while fishing. Over 20 species of water birds, including loons, ingest small pebbles which helps their gizzards break down fish bones. Loons have as many as 20 to 30 pebbles in their gizzard at any one time, so they have the potential to accidentally ingest lead fishing tackle while feeding. Discarded fishing line can be harmful to birds as well.

Already this year (2007) we received a report of a loon on Alva Lake with a fishhook caught in its bill. After checking, it turned out to be true. Not only is the fish hook caught

in the bird's bill, fishing line appears to be wrapped around its neck, so on the evening of Friday, May 11 we attempted a loon rescue to remove the hook and line.

A loon can only be caught at night using a boat, spotlights and a large net. Loons stay on the surface to protect their chicks so this is usually done after nesting. Our attempt once again proved this to be the case. We never even saw the Alva Lake loon pair. A loon can swim awful fast due to its large webbed feet, which are so big it is like us wearing a pair of size 45 shoes.

Thankfully, the hooked bird on Alva Lake is still able to dive and forage, so we'll try to catch the bird again after the pair has chicks.

I know it's sometimes impossible to retrieve fishing line. I grew up salmon fishing in Northwestern Oregon. The fish we caught would put your pike to shame. Our line was such a heavy pound test it looked like bailing twine. I'll never forget the time we caught a sea lion. Of course, we weren't reeling in a sea lion no matter how hard we tried, and that sea lion wasn't headed anywhere but out to sea. Our boat could take a lot, but it couldn't take the breakers at the mouth of the Nestucca River, so when Dad said cut the line, we cut the line, but there was no retrieving it. However, whenever you can, pick up fishing line and dispose of it properly. You may be saving a loon's life, not to mention a good night's rest for a loon watcher.

Thankfully, our 2006 loon year was fairly successful. Nine lakes in the Clearwater drainage near the community of Seeley Lake are monitored for common loons. Of those, five lakes had nesting pairs that produced six chicks. That might not seem like a lot to someone from Canada or Minnesota, but Montana only has around 200 loons so each one is special to us.

Summit Lake was our surprise. It had, to our knowledge, never had a nesting pair before, let alone produced a chick, so when a pair showed up and nested it caused quite a stir. Then, they had one chick. As you can imagine, that was one of the most watched chicks in the drainage. We wondered if the Summit Lake loons would return this year, and sure enough they have and are already nesting.

Along with Seeley Lake's lakes, ten lakes in the Blackfoot area near Ovando are also monitored for loons. However, none of those lakes, even the ones that had a nesting pair on the lake all summer, produced chicks in 2006. Some possible reasons for this include 1) the lakes being too shallow for our deep diving loons, 2) younger, less experienced loons taking over, and/or 3) predators on the mostly privately owned lakes in the Ovando area are less disturbed by humans, therefore the predators are more likely to find a loon nest. We worry about the trend in the Ovando area, but it gives us more reason to watch.

Our loon ranger last year was UM student, Ben Chappelow. His duties included recording loon data, placing loon nesting signs, public education, and flipping canoes, which, being such a big guy, he was good at. Poor dear.

Nevertheless, he still said, "I had a fun and successful summer. I learned a lot about wildlife management and gained valuable experience working with the public."

### **Hi Ho Silver...Away**

The new news this year is after six successful years of hiring college students to do nothing but watch loons and chat with folks about loons, we no longer have a loon ranger in our area.

I'll explain.

This year our loons will be monitored by a US Forest Service wildlife tech that also has other duties. Funding changes brought about this development. So the days of our having a loon ranger that specifically monitors loons are over. The good news is loons are officially on the Forest Service and other government agencies' radar screens, and other areas in the state still have loon rangers.

And the loons don't care. They are already back and with the warm weather are nesting sooner than they have in the past few years. Sadie Campbell, an employee at the Seeley Lake Ranger Station, and I put the loon signs out on Seeley Lake on the morning of Friday, May 11 and our loon pair started nesting as early as Sunday so we weren't any too early.

The fun thing this year is our nesting loon on can be seen from the Seeley Lake Ranger Station viewing blind so grab your binocs and take a loon walk to the viewing blind.

To learn more about loons in the Clearwater/Blackfoot Drainage, plan to attend the Seeley Lake Loon and Fish Festival held in Seeley Lake on Memorial Day Weekend, visit the Montana Loon Society web site at [montanaloons.org](http://montanaloons.org), or call the Seeley Lake Ranger Station at (406) 677-2233. Have a safe summer.

