

Loon Watch 2007

## **Supersize Me**

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Last spring I was convinced we had the goofiest mother loon I had ever seen. The female loon kept trying to feed six-inch long fish to the newly hatched chick. Adult common loons can eat fish that are quite large – some up to ten and twelve inches long - but newly hatched chicks need fish that are more like one inch long.

Didn't the female loon know this?

I also noticed the chick mostly stayed near the adult male. Male and female loons dress alike, but the male in the pair is usually larger. Not only that, our male loon was banded, so it could easily be determined which was the male. The chick mostly rested on the male's back and was fed by the male. Even though both female and male loons feed the chicks and carry them on their backs, typically the female bares most of the burden of caring for them. The male takes the role of protector, patrolling the water beyond the mother and chicks, often staying halfway between them and where ever a bald eagle is sitting. Our loons were in role reversal mode.

Nevertheless, the chick grew, and was eventually able to eat food provided by either adult, so the first few weeks passed with no evident harm to the chick. However, I still wondered about their goofy arrangement.

Then on June 25, when we captured the female loon for banding, the mystery was solved. As you may know from past Loon Watch articles, loons are caught at night using boats and spotlights. The spotlights confuse the loons and hide the boat. If the loons have

chicks, they stay on the surface of the water to protect their chicks. Then the loons can be scooped up in large, soft nets.

After locating the birds, the female practically swam up to us in her acquired role as chick protector. When she was netted and in the boat, we finally discovered the reason for the role reversal.

The adult female loon had an injured bill. It was missing a small piece of skin near the base of the bill and the top mandible was slightly twisted. Her bill no longer closed all the way, so she could only catch larger fish, which she could eat, but the newly hatched chick couldn't. In her injured state, the male adult apparently picked up the slack and cared for the chick.

It was a good thing our male loon was so attentive. From Salmon to Summit including Placid Lake, the Seeley Lake chick was the only chick in the whole drainage. (The only other chicks in the area were two chicks on a private lake in the Ovando.)

No one knows for sure why we only had one chick in the whole drainage system. We usually have 4-5. Nationally, one in four nests naturally fail, so that would mean that out of our six nests in the Clearwater drainage, one and a half nests, statically speaking, would fail. In our case, five out of the six nests failed. Some failure could be explained by the fact that a few of our loons' first nest attempts were flooded in the low elevation runoff, and renested. A renest attempt is less likely to be successful than the first nesting attempt.

In addition, the male loon on Lake Alva also had a bill problem. It had a large fishing lure caught in its bill. If you remember last year's loon watch, biologists attempted a loon

rescue prior to nesting, but without chicks, were unable to catch the loon. The Lake Alva pair stayed on the lake through July, but no known nest attempt was made.

It also happened to be the first year since 2000 that we didn't specifically have a loon ranger. A forest service wildlife tech looked after the loons along with other forest service duties, but no one knows whether that had any detrimental effect.

This year a loon ranger is again specifically hired to watch our loons. Naomi Alhadeff is a graduating senior in Wildlife Biology from the University of Montana. If you have the chance to meet her, please welcome her and give her all the help you can.

While we are loons watching, the Common Loon Working Group, a group of agency and private biologists, continues to refine Montana's loon habitat conditions. They have developed codes that apply to each lake.

A Type A lake has loons that attempted nesting in the past four years, like Seeley Lake.

Type B lakes have had nests in the past, but no longer do, like Salmon Lake.

Type C lakes are lakes under 5000 feet in elevation that have the potential for nesting. (Loons for the most part don't attempt nesting over 5000 feet as these lakes are not ice free for a long enough period of time to allow the chicks to mature. Type C lakes identified that are over 13 acres have less than 50% shoreline development, and if they are under 13 acres have less than 10% shoreline development.

Type D lakes are those over 5000 feet that are only used for foraging, like Marshall Lake.

Type E lakes are lakes whose status is not yet determined.

Type F lakes are lower elevation lakes that are used only for foraging.

Finally, Type M lakes are used for migration and as staging lakes (lakes that loons use until their usual lake is ice free).

Due to our late ice-off, which was April 30 (2008), 10-14 days later than usual, a couple interesting situations have already occurred on two area Type M lakes. A loon landed on Frenchtown Pond, which is so small biologists didn't know whether or not they were going to have to attempt a loon rescue. A loon's body is heavy for its wing size, so they "patter" across the surface of the water to take off. One thousand feet is a sufficient loon "runway," so biologists measured the pond to make sure it was long enough. It was determined to be big enough, so the biologists didn't do anything and the next day the loon was gone.

Then a loon landed on Elbow Lake, near Harper's Lake before ice-off. A landowner videotaped the loon sitting on the ice. The loon couldn't take off without a water runway, so it sat on the ice for a couple days. With the unsafe ice conditions, the landowner didn't feel it would be prudent to attempt a rescue. When the ice melted, the loon took off.

With this year's late ice-off, it's anyone's guess how our loons will do this year. So, if you are out on the lakes, please obey the loon nesting signs. These signs are placed around the nest site to allow the loons to nest in peace and quiet. If you see a loon doing the "penguin dance", running across the water with chest raised high and flapping its wings, which is a loon most distressed behavior, please move away. If you are unfamiliar with this behavior, please refer to this year's Loon and Fish Festival T-shirt. The design is perfect for educating people about a loon's penguin dance.

In addition, please watch for the new loon in the area this spring. I don't want to give away any surprises, but look for this larger-than-life loon at the Seeley Lake Loon and Fish Festival held Saturday and Sunday, May 24 and 25 of Memorial Weekend.

To learn more about Montana's common loons please attend Montana loon lady, Lynn Kelly's loon walk, leaving from the Community Center (just passed Mile Marker 15 on Highway 83 North) at 2:00 on Saturday afternoon, May 24. Lynn will also present a spectacular loon slide show at 7:00 Saturday evening at the Community Hall. (Please note that this is a change from past years when her presentations was held at the Seeley Lake Ranger Station.) In addition to her program, a loon twenty-questions type contest with an adult and children's category will be held with prizes for the winners.

Throughout the evening, cookies and lemonade will be served, so join us for a wonderful evening of fun, entertainment, and learning. You'll have a great time, and may become a loon enthusiast like the rest of us!

Have a fun AND safe summer.