

2009 LOON WATCH

The Montana Loon Society Announces the Arrival of *New Loons of Montana* License Plate

By Donna Love

The Clearwater/Blackfoot area, located near Seeley Lake takes in two drainage systems. The Blackfoot drainage has its headwaters east of Ovando. Lewis and Clark once explored this area on their way back from the Pacific. In their journals they called the valley “the land of the prairie knobs.” Today we know this area to be the terminus moraine of a large ancient ice age glacier. As the glacier melted it left kames (the prairie knobs) and many large kettle lakes, which are lakes that form when huge chunks of ice the size of cruise ships melt.

Glaciers also formed the Clearwater drainage. Although many creeks drain into the Clearwater River, this drainage has its start at Clearwater Lake high on the eastern side of the Seeley Lake Valley. This lake is south of a terminus moraine that forms the pass that divides the Swan River, which flows north to Flathead Lake, from the Clearwater River, which flows south to join the Blackfoot River. It was near this confluence that Lewis and Clark camped, writing in their journals that the river had clear water. At the time, they didn’t know about the many lakes upstream where the water slowed and dropped its sediments allowing the water to continue downstream clearer than it had been before entering a lake. After the glaciers melted, loons found lakes in both the Blackfoot and the Clearwater drainages perfect for raising chicks.

Today, we struggle to keep loons nesting here. In the two combined drainages, 19 lakes are watched for loons. As a recap, in 2006, five lakes in the Clearwater had nesting pairs that produced six chicks, but not one nesting loon was seen that year in the Blackfoot. In 2007, only one chick on Seeley Lake hatched in the Clearwater drainage and none in the Blackfoot. In 2008, the Clearwater rebounded and had eight chicks on six different lakes and two chicks on a privately owned lake in the Blackfoot drainage.

Which brings us to the summer of 2009. In 2009, Loon Ranger Carrie Sanneman worked hard to see three chicks hatched on two lakes in the Clearwater and one chick in the Blackfoot drainage on a different privately owned lake than the one used in 2008. As you can see, our loon numbers are all over the place. A large obstacle to nesting loons is more people enjoying our lakes. To help, the Montana Loon Society supports loon rangers in the field to educate the public, and to sign nests asking people to stay back. (Loons don't walk well on land so they readily leave the nest when disturbed to move into water where they can better defend themselves.)

To help provide funding for education and loon rangers, the Montana Loon Society is pleased to announce that its new Loons of Montana license plate is now available for purchase in county courthouses around Montana. The Society has been working on the plate since 2008 when their fundraising campaign got off the ground. Since, the Society has been working on the design and striving to fulfill the many state requirements to having their own plate.

The State of Montana began sponsored plates several years ago. These plates represent qualified organizations, colleges or governmental bodies. They are designed

with distinctive backgrounds, colors or phrases that identify the sponsoring organization. The loon plate has “Montana Loon Society” on it.

To use the Montana Loon Society plate, you must register your vehicle annually, with one exception. Beginning January 1, 2008 by paying a one-time contribution, light vehicles 11 years or older are eligible for permanent registration and trailers that are permanently registered, may have sponsored plates. The cost of purchasing the Montana Loon Society plate and renewing it each year includes a donation that goes directly to the Montana Loon Society. By purchasing the Loons of Montana plate, people are showing support for the Montana Loon Society and making a financial contribution to its work. The Montana Loon Society will receive \$20 from the sale of each plate, which will provide much needed funding. Proceeds from this plate will put loon rangers in the field, provide educational programs, purchase loon buoys, and complete many important projects.

Any individual or business who owns a passenger car, pickup, van, sport utility vehicle, motor home, large truck or bus that is registered in Montana can display the plate. A few organizations restrict their plates to people who meet certain eligibility requirements. For example, the Montana State Fire Chiefs' Association plate is available only to active and retired firefighters and board members. The Montana Loon Society doesn't restrict its plate. They hope all of Montana will show support for their loons. There is no special process to apply for or renew the loon plate. The county treasurer issues or renews the plates when you pay the applicable vehicle registration fees and any special license plate fees.

The Montana Loon Society would like to thank artist, Monte Dolack, for giving permission to use his spectacular Loons of the Swan Valley print, and graphic artist, Eileen Chontos who developed the design. In addition, we would like to thank a most generous anonymous donor and others that made this plate possible. To see the new plate online go to: <http://www.doj.mt.gov/driving/platedesign/wildlife.asp>

To learn more about Montana's loons please attend Seeley Lake's Loon and Fish Festival on Saturday and Sunday of Memorial Weekend, May 29 and 30. Loon walks and talks are sure to inspire. Have a safe and healthy summer.