

2010 Seeley Lake Loon Watch
Montana Loon Society Holds Contest to Count Loon Bands AND
A Recap of Our Clearwater and Blackfoot Loons Over the Last Ten Years

By Donna Love

The first Seeley Lake Loon Watch I wrote in the spring of 1998 was a review of the first summer (1997) that I became interested in loons. Interested is an understatement. It was almost to the point of distraction. Some of you may remember those long articles – so lengthy that Gary Noland, the previous Pathfinder owner had to break them up into two and three parts to be able to print them all.

A lot has changed since then. For one thing, loon rangers are now hired to watch our loons. This year three rangers will be hired. Their areas include the Blackfoot/Clearwater, Kalispell West/Thompson Chain of Lakes, and Kalispell North/Tally Lake area.

But the loon rangers still need your help. Since loon rangers are college students, some cabin and lakeshore owners set signs out in spring if the loons nest prior to loon rangers coming on board. (Probably not going to be a problem this year!) In addition, many people have purchased the new MLS license plate, which is a great help money and moral wise. Others help count loons on our Loon Days. This year the Loon Days fall on Saturday, May 14 and Saturday, July 16.

One very significant way volunteers can help is so important that this year MLS is holding a contest with two \$200 cash prizes and one \$100 cash prize. This contest is to find and report banded loons. About half of Montana's 120 breeding birds are banded (about 60) and it's important for research to find these birds. Plum Creek Timber Company has generously funded the cash prizes. The three contests include:

- 1) \$200 cash prize for the greatest number of 2011 observations of banded loons reported by May 31.
- 2) \$200 award for the most (cumulatively) reported by July 19
- 3) \$100 cash prize drawn randomly for anyone who sends a band report in to encourage everyone to send a band report in even if they only report one.

Band observations must be sent to Chris Hammond with Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks by phone at (406) 751-4582 in Kalispell or e-mail at chammond@mt.gov. Sightings must be sent in by the above dates. Chris has to confirm the sightings before awarding the prizes, so send your sightings to him as soon as possible, so he can get out in the field and check them. (Hint: 4 loons have already been seen on Salmon Lake.)

Federal and State government employees are not eligible to earn the cash prizes, including loon rangers, so if you love to watch loons, this might be the year to earn the gas money to visit your favorite loon lakes.

We have also seen some changes in loon management over the years. Prior to 1999, when the Common Loon Working Group (CLWG) formed, a dedicated crew of volunteers in the Montana Loon Society managed Montana's loons. Lynn Kelly, President of the Society, headed this crew. Due to her efforts and the efforts of MLS, the CLWG formed. Now today, this group of state and federal employees manage the state's loon population. Their efforts are backed by MLS.

Here's a couple of the tough issues CLWG is addressing.

- Non-lead Sinkers: The CLWG recommends replacement of lead weights and jigs in the sizes known to cause loon mortality, which is 1.5 inches or less along the longest axis without hook (Pokras et al. 2009). In other words, loons aren't known to pick up pebbles that are larger than 1.5 inches. Loons pick up smaller pebbles.
- Aquatic Nuisance Species: They are becoming aware (as we all are) of the need to use the same buoys in the same lake each year and correctly wash with bleach-water waders and other items used in loon management, including boats that may be used in more than one lake.
- And, a several years long project to write the Conservation Plan for the Common Loon in Montana, which is now completed and available online at <http://fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/management/commonLoon/default.html>

The CLWG also keeps the latest loon data for all of Montana. Last year in July, 215 loons were counted with 69 territorial pairs that hatched 44 chicks.

However, there were no chicks in the Seeley Lake area last year. Ben Turnock, the 2010 Blackfoot/Clearwater Loon Ranger speculates a wide variety of reasons for the failure.

Of the 12 lakes in the Clearwater, six are pair/bond lakes with regularly nesting loons. A strong hailstorm on Placid Lake the night that at least one chick hatched might have killed the chick(s).

The loon pair on Seeley Lake were nesting on May 15, and was later seen with one chick, but disappeared in July. A forest service employee reported a person on a wave runner chasing the chick a few days before it disappeared.

Alva Lake's pair was seen nesting on the island on May 17, but soon abandoned the nest. During later surveys, the loons weren't on the nest. Ben suggests that recreation and boating might be the reason for Alva Lake's continued failure. The island is a big draw for people to explore even with the signs in.

Rainy Lake had a nest, but may have lost it due to an intruding loon or loons as other loons were frequently seen on the lake with the nesting pair.

Clearwater Lake had a nesting pair and was tolerant of float tube and bank fishermen, but the nest failed anyway.

Summit Lake had one chick, but it was only seen for about three weeks and then it was gone.

The Ovando area did a little better. Ovando has nine lakes that occasionally have loons, but only three lakes with regularly nesting loons. Upsata Lake is the only public access lake with nesting loons. It had a nest and eggshells were removed from the nest after it was abandoned, so we know that at least one chick hatched. Little Doney on Plum Creek land also had a nest, but no chicks were seen. The only chicks in the Ovando area were two from the same nest on a private lake.

Since we didn't have any loon chicks in the Seeley Lake area, I thought it would be interesting to examine the chick count for the Ovando/Seeley Lake areas over the past ten years since 2000. These numbers were taken from Loon Ranger Reports, past MLS Newsletters, and my Seeley Lake Loon Watch articles. (To read all past Loon Watch articles about the Blackfoot/Clearwater area go to my web site at donnalove.com and click on "Other Writing.")

For clarity, there is a chart for each of the two areas. As you can see the Clearwater area held fairly steady through the first of the decade, but since 2005 there have been wide swings in the numbers. For instance, 2007 wasn't a good chick year for the Clearwater, but 2008, which had a slow high elevation runoff that didn't flood the nests, was a banner year.

Things looked bleak for Ovando during the middle of the decade, but have recently gotten a little better. Why? No one knows for sure. It is important to note that even though numbers are low in the Clearwater/Blackfoot, the number of loons in the state hasn't varied much over those same years. So apparently, when our area is suffering other areas are doing better and vice versa.

What is important is that we all take pride in our loons and all our wildlife. Loons need clean water, lots of fish to eat, and a quiet place to nest and raise their young. If there is anything you can do to help with those items, please be selfless and do so. Together we can make sure that loons continue to be a part of the Last Best Place for our children and our grandchildren.

To learn more about loons, you can find the Montana Loon Society on line at www.montanaloons.org. Our loon license plate can be purchased at county courthouses around the state. You can also attend the Seeley Lake Loon and Fish Festival held on Saturday and Sunday of Memorial Weekend. At the Festival you can watch loon videos, hear a loon talk, and even take a loon walk to see loons.

Have a safe and happy summer!

CLEARWATER	CHICKS
2000	4
2001	5
2002	5
2003	4
2004	3
2005	3
2006	6
2007	1
2008	8
2009	3
2010	0

BLACKFOOT	Chicks
2000	2
2001	4
2002	4
2003	5
2004	4
2005	0
2006	0
2007	0
2008	2
2009	1
2010	2