

2013 SEELEY LAKE, MONTANA LOON WATCH

Montana Loon Productivity through the Years

By Donna Love

In Montana, common loons are a Species of Concern. This means loons are considered at risk due to declining population trends, threats to their habitats, and/or restricted distribution. In the 1970's, the late P.D. Skaar, creator of *Montana Bird Distribution*, provided the first early information on Montana's loons. In 1983, Dr. Skaar's son, Don Skaar, who is a wildlife biologist with MT FWP, started the Montana Loon Study, organizing the first set of volunteers to monitor loons. In 1990, Don completed the first state loon management plan. In 1992, educator/wildlife biologist, Lynn Kelly, completed her master's thesis on loons demonstrating that placing floating signs around nest sites in high human use areas played a pivotal role in chick survival.

In 1989, the Montana Loon Study transitioned into the Montana Loon Society, which received its non-profit status in 1999. Also in 1999, the Common Loon Working Group, which is a collection of individuals from various state and federal agencies, industry, the Confederate Salish and Kootenai Tribes, and the Montana Loon Society began. In 2009, a new state management plan was completed. (Click on the picture of the loon at this site to see the plan:

<http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/management/>

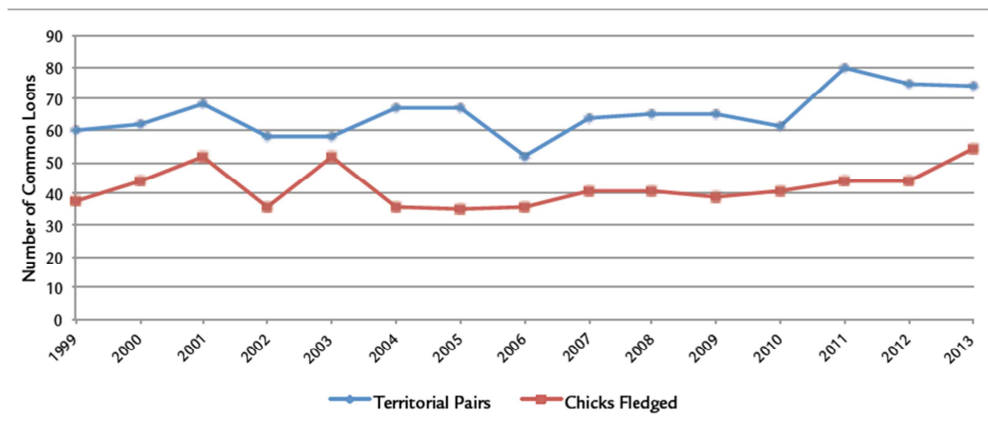
Chris Hammond with Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks reports, "Montana continues to support the largest breeding population of common loons in the western continental United States with a 10-year average summer count of 216 individuals. This population consists of an



Wildlife Biologist/Educator Lynn Kelly scoping for loons on Seeley Lake.

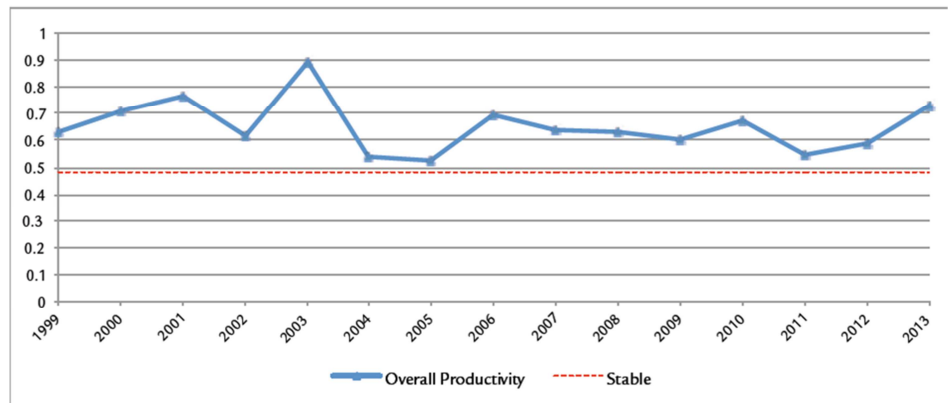
average of 62 territorial pairs, 52 non-breeding “single” adults, and 41 chicks. Since surveys began in the late 1980’s, the population has remained remarkably stable. Chick production in Montana appears to be above average with between 0.66 and 0.70 chicks fledged per territorial pair.”

The graphs below show this steady rate.



The number of territorial loon pairs has increased in Montana by 23% since 2000 (top line) and the number of chicks fledged (bottom line) has ranged between 35 in 2005 with a high of 54 in 2013.

In addition, national models indicate that 0.48 fledged young per territory (overall) is needed for a sustainable population. At no time in the past 15 years did Montana drop below the sustainable population level. *Learn more at <http://www.briloon.org/looncenter/restore>*



(Graphs provided by Chis Hammond, MT FWP.)

Blackfoot/Clearwater (Ovando/Seeley Lake) Area

Specifically, in 2013, the combined Blackfoot/Clearwater Area nesting pairs were found on nine territories and represent 94.73% of all adult loons observed in the area, which means that

almost all of the loons sited in the Blackfoot/Clearwater area last year were a part of a breeding pair. Of the pairs, eight nests hatched for an 88.89% nesting success rate, which is a high rate of success. National statics show that one in four nests fails naturally, which is only a 75% nesting success rate.

In the Blackfoot area three breeding pairs hatched four chicks with three surviving until the July Loon Day for 75% survivability. Upsata Lake and Doney Reservoir each had a chick and Shoup Lake hatched and fledged 2 chicks.

In the Clearwater area six breeding pairs hatched and fledged six chicks, one each Seeley and Rainey lakes, and two each on Placid and Summit lakes.

Clearwater Lake hatched two chicks, but on June 30, the Loon Ranger, Mike Strickland, actually watched a bald eagle working in concert with another eagle take one of the chicks. At this age, the chicks are usually large enough to be left on their own, but its parents were across the lake confronting a third loon on the lake. Mike suspects the second chick may have been taken the same way, too, as it was soon missing.

Lake Alva's pair nested on the island, which they have done since 2003. Since moving to the island they have only hatched and fledged one chick in 2006 and one in 2008. This year they also lost the nest. The island is just too large a draw for people even with the signs up. On May 25, a female kayaker explored the island with her dog.



The sheriff was called by boaters, but the woman was not cited. On June 8, the Loon Ranger paddled out to advise two teens that were wading in the water near the

Loon Ranger Mike Strickland looking for loon nest on Seeley Lake.

nest that the area was closed. While there, Mike confirmed that both eggs were still present and unharmed. On June 16, when both loons had abandoned the nest, he collected only one unhatched, badly damaged egg about five feet from the nest. It will be interesting to see what happens on Alva now that it is a no-wake lake.

Swan (Condon and Bigfork) Area

Although this is the Seeley Lake Loon Watch, Montana Loon Society Board Member and US Forest Service wildlife biologist, Mark Ruby, reported in the 2014 Montana Loon Society Newsletter that the Swan Area had 5 nesting attempts by loon pairs in 2013. Of these attempts, 3 pairs produced 5 chicks. Loons nested on Loon Lake (Ferndale), Van Lake, Loon Lake (Kraft Creek), Crystal Lake, and Pierce Lake. Nests on Van Lake and Loon Lake (Kraft Creek) failed. Reasons for nest failure are unknown. The loon pairs on Loon Lake (Ferndale) and Pierce Lake both produced 2 chicks. One chick hatched on Crystal Lake, which is in the Mission Mountains Wilderness. The exciting news for the Swan is that the 2013 Loon Season included two nesting attempts undocumented in recent history: Crystal Lake hasn't nested in the past 10 years and Van Lake hasn't nested in the past 5 years. Mark wrote, "This exciting new nesting activity adds to an observed trend in the Swan Valley. When considering the past decade, four new nesting attempts have been documented on lakes within the Swan Area over the past 4 years."

2013 Loon Chick Count at a Glance: To quickly see how our Blackfoot and Clearwater loon neighbors fared in 2013, take a look at the included chart. Bumps and dips naturally occur in loon numbers. In Montana, flood years are a major cause in the drop in chicks, but not all areas flood the same year. So, during some years, such as 2006, the Clearwater had a banner year while the Blackfoot didn't fair so well. Conversely, in 2010 and 2011, the Blackfoot did better than the Clearwater. It is only cause for concern if numbers drop and drop without bounce-back.

However, during these same years the number of chicks in the state of Montana has remained roughly the same with an average 41 chicks per year. In 2013, 54 chicks survived in the state until the July Loon Day count and are assumed to have migrated to the ocean, including 8 chicks in Glacier National Park.

Year	Clear-water	Black-foot
2000	4	2
2001	5	4
2002	5	4
2003	4	5
2004	3	4
2005	3	0
2006	6	0
2007	1	0
2008	8	2
2009	3	1
2010	0	2
2011	1	3
2012	4	3
2013	6	3

Montana Lead Free For Loons

In the past few years, people have begun to recognize the harm that lead sinkers and discarded fishing tackle and line has on



Montana Lead Free for Loons bulletin board in display at Seeley Lake Ranger Station, Lolo National Forest.

waterfowl, including loons. The Common Loon Working Group has developed a Montana Lead Free for Loons program to educate the public about this hazard. In the Seeley Lake Area, a bulletin board is set up at the Seeley Lake Ranger Station that explains the dangers and lists alternative tackle. Be sure to check it out before you

head out fishing on the lake. Download the brochure Society web site, or pick one up at the Ranger Station.

Non-lead tackle is becoming readily available at responsible sporting good stores near you. And, always be sure to pick up any discarded tackle or line.

Looking Ahead

This year we say goodbye to Mike Strickland, who was the loon ranger for the Blackfoot/Clearwater (Ovando/Seeley Lake) Area for two years. It is helpful to have the same loon ranger as they get to know the area and the needs of each lake. However, the loon ranger

program is a cooperative program between state universities and the MT FWPs intern program, so loon rangers can only participate in the program through the first summer following their graduation. This year's loon ranger, Cory Reiniger, another student from University of Montana is already hired and looking forward to working with the Seeley and Ovando communities.

Although the Loon and Fish Festival was canceled in its former format, please attend the Seeley Lake Food Bank Soup Fundraiser that will be held at the Seeley Lake Community Hall on Saturday, May 25 from 10:00-4:00. Be sure to stop by the Montana Loon Society booth, which will still be there educating folks on the needs of loon. For loon enthusiasts, I will lead a Montana Loon Society Walk and Talk to a nearby nest starting at the Community Hall at 3:00.

To further learn how to help loons, go to the Montana Loon Society at www.montanaloons.com. To join the Society contact the Montana Loon Society at P.O. Box 1131, Seeley Lake, or call 406-677-3767. Another way to help is to purchase our Montana Loon Society License Plate now available at a Montana County Courthouse near you.

Each spring we look forward to seeing loons and they have never disappointed us. Let's not disappoint them either. Give them space and time to nest and hatch their chicks. This will ensure that we have loons for our grandchildren and their children to enjoy.