

2014 Blackfoot-Clearwater Loon Watch

By Donna Love

Can common loons be frozen in lake ice? Well, sadly, yes, and it may have occurred on lakes in the Clearwater and Blackfoot before, but no one has reported it. However, it has happened two times in the past fifteen years on Rogers Lake near Kalispell.



Young loon begin rescued from freezing lake ice on Roqer's Lake, 2014

In 1999, homeowners on Rogers Lake rescued a loon from freezing lake ice by jumping up and down in a small aluminum boat to break a path through the thin ice to reach the bird. They couldn't catch the loon in daylight, so they trolled back and forth in the boat to keep the pathway to the loon open until nightfall. Then they used a large net to capture the loon. The loon might have been one of their pair that hadn't migrated due to a large swath of missing flight feathers. On the ocean in January and February where loons spend the winter, loons lose all their flight feathers and regrow new ones. Perhaps this bird started early. Perhaps it was hurt. The reason for the missing feathers was never determined. The bird was released on Flathead Lake, which doesn't totally freeze over. In the hub-bub, no one thought to have the loon banded. The loon rescue was filmed and made into a DVD, *"The Great Montana Loon Rescue."*

Last year, on Tuesday, November 18, another loon - this time a juvenal - was seen swimming a small area of open water on Rogers Lake. Unexpected low temperatures earlier in November had caused the lake to rapidly freeze. No chicks survived on the lake in 2014, so the young bird had probably stopped on the lake during migration. Homeowners contacted Gael Bissell of MT Fish Wildlife and Parks in Kalispell. Bissell put together a rescue team, including Jon Obst with MT Fish Wildlife and Parks, Bob Lee of Flathead Search and Rescue, and Gary Moses, recently retired from the National Park Service with training in rescues. The rescue team, this time wearing dry suits, was able to walk out on the thicker-than-usual ice for that time of year to draw

near to the loon. Using a safety sled and ropes, the team spread a mist net to capture the loon. After a couple dives, it dove into the net and became entangled. The bird was lifted out of the water and placed in a pet carrier.

The bird was examined by veterinarian, Dr. Dennis Dugger of Central Valley Animal Hospital in Kalispell. An x-ray showed no broken bones, but it had a damaged wrist on one wing, which may be the reason why the bird hadn't continued its migration. Dr. Dugger felt the loon's wrist would heal with time, so the bird was banded and released on Flathead Lake. The bird's bands include: left leg - silver USFS band above, blue with white dot below; right leg - yellow above yellow. If you spot a loon with these bands, please report when and where to Gael Bissell: gbissell@mt.gov. However, like the 1999 rescue, the 2014 rescue was also filmed. A boxed DVD set, *The Great Montana Loon Rescue*,



Young loon being released on Flathead Lake after being rescued from freezing lake ice, 2014



Volumes 1 (1999) and 2 (2014), produced by Wild and Free Montana, John Ashley Fine Art Photography in Kalispell is now available from the Montana Loon Society at P.O. Box 1131, Seeley Lake, MT 59868, or by emailing montanaloons@blackfoot.net. Each set is \$20 plus \$5 shipping. Proceeds benefit the Montana Loon Society.

Loon rescues happen only occasionally in Montana, but the Montana Loon Society supports the Common Loon Working Group recommendations that common loon rescues should be attempted in some cases. A rescue may be appropriate when a loon is injured or when it is unable to escape from a situation such as a wet highway or a freezing water body. All rescues should be attempted by a trained team. (To read the full recommendations, please go to <http://fwp.mt.gov/fishAndWildlife/management/> and click on the picture of the loon. Then click on "Handling of Live Common Loons and Specimens.")

Blackfoot - Clearwater 2014 Loon Season

In 2014, the Blackfoot/Clearwater loon season covered 20 lakes. Nesting success was decent even with the high spring runoff. Nesting pairs were found on 8 territories. The Clearwater had six nests, which produced 7 chicks (2 on Rainy, 1 on Summit, 1 on Clearwater, 2 on Placid, and 1 on Hidden. Hidden Lake hasn't had a

nest in recorded history. It hatched 2 chicks, but only 1 survived.) Two nests in this area failed: Seeley Lake lost its nest due to high water and didn't re-nest. Lake Alva loons nested on the island, but lost the nest (cause unknown).

In the Blackfoot (Ovando) area two nests produced 2 chicks (1 on Shoup and 1 on Upsata, which is the third year in a row that Upsata has had a chick, which is a great comeback after several years of no chicks.) Hard to find and reach, Little Doney may have had a nest as two loons were observed on the lake early in the season, but later no chicks were seen. In all, 9 chicks in this combined area survived until July Loon Day.

2014 Loon Chick Count at a Glance: To quickly see how our Blackfoot and Clearwater loon neighbors fared last year, 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 fare 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 2014, 60 total chicks survived in the state until the July Loon Day count and are assumed to have migrated to the ocean.

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
2014	7	2

Our new loon ranger this year is, Ashley Huinker, a student at Montana State University. When you see



her out and about be sure to tell her how much you appreciate her work for loons. Have a fun AND safe summer!

2015 Clearwater/Blackfoot Loon Ranger Ashley Huinker educating people to watch for loon nesting signs in the Seeley-Swan Valley Chain of Lakes.