

1997 Seeley Lake Loon Watch



Loon Lady Lynn Kelly removing the "nesting sanctuary" signs that are placed in the lakes at critical nesting times.



A photographer on assignment for Sunset Magazine finds many things of interest, other than loons, for his shutter.

(Editor's note: Donna Love is the wife of Tim Love, Ranger for the Seeley Lake Forest Service Station. This is a condensed version of a story she wrote about helping Loon Lady Lynn Kelly monitor a nest last year)

by Donna M. Love

(edited by Lynn Kelly, Wildlife Biologist)

(Editor's Note: Donna Love is the wife of Seeley Lake Ranger Tim Love. Together with their children, they live at the Ranger Station Compound at the north end of Seeley Lake, and they are close observers of wildlife on and around the lake. The following is a condensed version of Donna Love's experiences with a nesting loon family in the summer of 1997.)

NOISY NEIGHBORS

Loons are special to the Seeley Lake area, but when we first moved here three years ago they were just a noisy couple who lived next door. Last summer I had the opportunity to learn just how special they are.

Five kinds of loons grace the world: yellow-billed, red throated, arctic, pacific and our neighbors - the common loon. In Montana though, the common loon is anything but common. It is estimated that only 200 loons consider Montana home for the summer. This is the largest loon population of any state west of the Mississippi River. Approximately 65 pairs nest in the state, and of those only 24 to 26 pairs raise one to two chicks each year. In the Seeley-Swan Valley, nine pairs were documented in 1997. We now consider ourselves fortunate to have one pair as our neighbors.

Our loon pair returned from their warm winter ocean home in late April. When we first heard their wail, we laughed, "They're baaaack." On May 9, while out for an evening stroll, my husband, Tim, and I happened upon Lynn Kelly, the wildlife biologist who, for the past twelve years, has been a leader in Montana's Loon Management Program. Lynn had her spotting scope set up at the wildlife viewing blind located at the north end of the Forest Service complex. Lynn was especially excited because a pair of loons were showing definite signs of nest building on a little island in the back waters of the lake. We watched the loons and visited with Lynn until the sun set. At the end of our conversation, Lynn asked if I would like to be the "loon watcher" for this pair. Loon watching consisted simply of observing the loon's activities and reporting back to Lynn. I gladly accepted the job.

Because the loons were nest building, the first need was to put a "loon nesting sanctuary" sign between the backwaters and the main lake to help keep the site undisturbed. They are a hardy species, but will not tolerate people within 140 yards of their nest. This needed to be done with expediency because a Mr. Pike fishing tournament was scheduled for the next weekend. In the morning on May 10, Lynn and I paddled a canoe to the inlet of the lake and anchored the floating sign in place. Then we returned to the viewing blind. The loon pair was still busily setting up housekeeping.

Loons usually lay two large eggs - one day apart. The eggs are olive brown with dark brown spots and are incubated for 26-29 days by both parents. The female sits on the nest about 60% of the time and the male the remainder. If the eggs are lost, loons can re-nest, but re-nesting attempts are often unsuccessful, especially if it occurs after May 15. Water levels may recede too far after that, leaving them high and dry. And a later hatch doesn't allow the chicks enough time to mature before the fall migration. By Lynn's calculations, if the eggs survived, they would hatch on June 9 or 10. One egg hatch is typical. If two eggs hatch, it indicates the lake is

exceptional loon habitat. By Wednesday of the first week, one loon dutifully sat on their nest at all times while the other fed in the main lake.

BABY-SITTING

My daily vigil to the nest had begun. Because of the record snowfall that winter, the spring runoff was high. While roads were washing out and the citizens of Seeley Lake were sandbagging their homes, the loons calmly sat on their nest. As the water rose, it began to bob on the surface becoming a natural waterbed.

Finally the waters began to abate. While our drama played itself out, other area lakes played out their own. Placid Lake, south of Seeley Lake, hatched one chick. Further south, loons on Salmon Lake put off nesting or lost their nest. To the north, Lake Alva's pair didn't nest until June and later abandoned it.

On June 9 both loons were at the nest, one sitting on it, the other in the water beside it. The next day the loons were gone - the nest deserted. Scanning the backwater I finally found them calmly floating side by side to the south of the nest. Bivouacking off the trail to get a closer look, I saw a little black chick sitting on the smallest adult's back.

We did it! We hatched a chick! I wanted to jump up and down for joy, but instead snapped a couple of pictures and backed away. We had a baby. The first baby loon to be successfully hatched on Seeley Lake in five years.

For the next couple of days the family stayed at the far reaches of the backwater. On the third day they swam closer to the viewing blind. What was this? A little black ball of fluff scampered behind the adults while another chick rode on one's back. Another chick! We had two tiny loon chicks! Lynn was thrilled by the news. She said that's why both loons were by the nest earlier. One was caring for the first hatched chick, while the other continued to incubate the second egg. My joy was rapidly extinguished by a new responsibility. Lynn informed me that the babies at this stage of development were "sitting ducks" for eagles who ferociously feed upon loon fledglings until the babies were old enough to dive.

EAGLE EYES

I love eagles, but all the National Geographic television specials replayed through my mind. But there was nothing I could do or should do. My job was to be a loon watcher - not a loon protector. Despite my fears, the loons didn't need me. They were ever watchful, always at their offsprings' side, ready with a shielding wing.

As a reprieve from my concerns, feeding time was comical. Loons primary food is fish, but they also feed on frogs, salamanders, crayfish and leeches. The chicks begged for food like all bird babies, only they were mobile and could chase mom or dad around. They would bump their little heads against the adult's necks when the parents returned from a dive. If the dive was successful, the babies pressed their beaks against the parent beak to receive the generously offered food. When full, the babies hopped up on whichever adult's back was closest and settle in for a nap.

June drew to a close. The little backwater lake began to dry up. Marsh grass slowly took over until only the deepest channels remained. The loon family was forced to leave the secure nursery for the open waters of the lake. In a few days I became familiar with their new patterns of behavior. They'd fish in the northwest corner of the lake and rest in the northeast corner. The two little balls of fluff grew into two sleek brown birds about half the size of the adults.

One morning the adults swam past our window alone. I ran out to see where the babies were. They popped up from underneath the water's surface. All four loons continued to feed and dive down the east shore of the lake until they were out of sight. The babies were now divers!

LOON TUNES

Relatively quiet in the backwater nursery, the loons on the open lake were abuzz with their various calls. They have four distinct calls. Their yodel is used when mating or when identifying or defending territory. Their hoot is a general communication between parents and chicks. Their tremolo is their alarm call which is sounded when disturbed. The wail, their most famous call, is their eagle call. Because of this call, it is easy to tell when an eagle is near. Due to loon watching I also became an eagle watcher as well. This watching has led to the discovery of an eagle nest at the north end of the lake. With Lynn's powerful spotting scope one eagle chick could be seen in the nest.

Knowing the eagles had a baby of their own made me a little less upset with them, but I was still a loon fan and hoped the eagles wouldn't win nature's super bowl - not that they didn't give it a good try. On July 3 the loon's eagle call drew me outside. Twice an eagle swooped down to make a grab for the babies. Both times the babies dove under water while the adults lunged in attack. The eagle was unsuccessful. It was good to see that the eagles were no longer a major threat.

BOATING WOES

As spring turned to summer, another kind of threat became apparent. It started slowly with a few local fishermen in small boats on the weekdays and a few canoeists willing to brave the still high Clearwater River. The weekends brought a few jet skis and ski boats pulling water skiers and tubes around the lake.

Fishing trollers, when not present in great numbers, seemed to pose no problem for the loons. They were loud enough to warn the loons of their presence and slow enough not to push them around. The jet skiers and ski boats were less manageable to the loons. Their loudness alerted the loons, but their speed and erratic behavior left the loons confused, sometimes separating the parents from the babies. Canoes, though slow moving, were so quiet they could come upon the loons, startling them and could move closer into their area and stay longer. For the most part, all this watercraft activity took place on the weekends. The north end of the lake on the weekdays was relatively quiet, allowing the loons five full days to rest and feed.

The first big weekend to test the birds' patience was the Fourth of July. We were away that weekend, but two mountain lions had killed a deer along the canoe trail on July 5 and the trail closed to traffic until the lions moved out of the area. The pressure on the loons from canoes was greatly reduced due to this. The trail re-opened July 10. Fireworks can also effect loons, but our fireworks are held at the opposite end of the lake, three miles away.

I asked Lynn why signs couldn't be put around the loons' lake nursery area as we had done with the nesting area. She explained that even though the loons use the nursery area daily, they move around the lake to feed. If boaters find the nursery empty, it may lead hem to disregard the nesting signs. The nesting signs were of utmost importance so for now only nesting signs are used.

On July 6 Lynn conducted one preliminary observation to compare 1997 boat traffic to the 1986-91 study she had previously done. She observed the lake between the hours of 2:00 and 6:00, watching the loons and noting everything they did and the disturbance to them from watercraft. She felt that the activity had not varied much from the previous studies. It will be studies like this that will determine the fate of loons on Montana's lakes.

Seeley Lake is big enough to support three pairs of loons. Old timers have told Lynn they recall three pairs nesting on the lake. In Lynn's twelve years of studying loons, one other pair nested mid-way up the lake on the east shore. She felt that pair had been there before the recreation level was what it is today and they had slowly become used to the activity. She feels that perhaps one or both died (loons can live to be thirty years old) and the activity now keeps other younger pairs from nesting there.

ANKLE BRACELETS

Banding birds is another way of studying loons. Until this year, no loons had been banded on this lake. The first banding took place on July 7 by Maine biologists, Dave Evers and Pete Reaman. The biologists, along with Lynn, Woody Baxter, an employee of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and volunteers conducted the night banding. Night bandings are done to use the cover of darkness to sneak up on the birds. And banding can only take place when there are chicks because the adults will stay on the surface to protect the chicks making it possible to catch them.

We traveled in two boats to where the birds had last been seen at sunset. There we stopped and played tape recordings of loon calls. Upon hearing the loons calling back, the action started. On came four large spotlights which found the loons. The boats roared to life and surged ahead. The loons, momentarily blinded by the lights, swam in a tight circle. The boats slowed as the biologists in the front of each boat scooped up a bird in a large fishing net. One boat had a baby and the other had the female adult. The birds were wrapped in towels and returned to the shore where the biologists quickly and efficiently began their work. To reduce stress, the baby was only banded, weighed and measured. The adult female was studied in depth. Shortly after midnight the loons were returned safely to their home.

Later that night we captured the other chick, but not the male adult. Thanks to that one night's work, three of the four loons on Seeley Lake were banded. If one of these birds are found in their winter home it will prove where the loons from the Seeley-Swan Valley spend their winters. At this time, no one knows for sure.

EGG HUNT

On July 10 Lynn needed help to gather egg fragments from the abandoned nest. We launched a canoe and pushed our way through the lily pads, sedges and other aquatic plants that blocked all but the main channel into the backwaters. After some searching we found the nest on a little island of cattails. We could still see the little trail on one side where the loons entered and exited the water. We found a handful of egg fragments on top of the flattened mound of mud which had been their nest. The fragments are sent to a laboratory to test for mercury poisoning and matched to the blood sample taken from the adult female to determine if there is a correlation between the two. About half the mercury poisoning in North America comes from coal burning industries, the rest from incinerators and other exhaust sources. Montana is relatively low on the mercury scale, but it is important to study both to show the normal levels and to note any changes.

GOOD-BYES

The babies continued to grow. They now separated from their parents and each other for longer periods of time. They grew to be almost the same size as the adults and developed white breasts.

August brought a new flurry of activity. The babies began to exercise their wings. They stretched and flapped them. They imitated the adult loon's famous pose of lifting their chests high out of the water and beat their wings. They practiced running take-offs, landing in the water with a splash. (Loons are good fliers, but it takes an extensive run on top of the water to get airborne.) All this new activity meant they would soon be leaving us.

The two busiest recreation weekends lay ahead, Labor Day and the weekend before that. The first weekend turned cold and stormy. Not many recreationists ventured out. Labor Day weekend was beautiful. This time I found myself one of the canoers with a professional photographer on assignment for Sunset Magazine who was in the area to photograph Seeley Lake. He had been specifically asked to include some pictures of the loons. The chicks were in the northeast corner of the lake amongst the lily pads (a good place for them with all the boating traffic) and the parents were a short distance away. The photographer didn't get his desired shots of adults and chicks together, but did get some nice ones. The pictures and article are to be out sometime in the summer of 1998.

The annual Montana Loon Society's end of the season meeting was September 13 at Placid Lake. I had to report that the adult male had left around September 10. That is, he was not seen after that date. The meeting itself was interesting and showed how many people are working for the benefit of the loons.

The chicks and female adult were seen until September 23. Their migration takes them to their salt water winter home where they join their cousins, the seagulls. The juveniles stay on the coast, perhaps in California or Texas, until they develop their black and white breeding plumage at the age of three. Then they travel back to their natal lake. The parents seem to tolerate their offspring better than other unrelated loons, but eventually the three year old will be run off the parent's territory. It will be seen as a single bird, feeding and resting in unoccupied area lakes. The youngster will find a territory, take a partner and breed sometime between the ages of five and nine. Their territory will be within thirty miles of their natal lake.

Now we look forward to next summer. Because loons have a strong identity to a certain lake, the adult loons will probably return to Seeley Lake. We hope so. They were delightful neighbors.