

Loon Watch 1999 - Part 1



Lynn Kelly, back, known as the Montana Loon Lady for her research of loons over several years, and Donna Love who assists her work now in the Seeley Lake area, are at the spotting scope in Seeley Lake.

May 4, 2000
Seeley Swan Pathfinder
Seeley Lake, Montana

By Donna Love

(Editor's note: the following report and photos by Donna Love on loons and their nesting habits and population in the Seeley Swan Chain of Lakes will appear in three installments over the next three weeks.)

Common loons are goosed-sized black and white diving birds known for their striking black and white plumage and haunting calls. They live in the northern half of the Northern Hemisphere. Montana is a part of their most southern breeding grounds. Last year 35 chicks were hatched and raised on 26 Montana lakes.

At one time Colorado, California and Oregon all had nesting loons. Washington has 10 nesting loon pairs and is working toward having them put on their state's endangered list. Idaho is struggling to keep their 14 loons. Wyoming has so few it doesn't publish where they are. Montana has a population of around 200. The increase in water recreation, shoreline development, introduction of non-native species and springtime angling in nesting areas has caused concern for Montana's loons.

The Clearwater River Drainage nestled between the lower Mission Mountains and Swan Range is important loon habitat. With six substantial lakes in the drainage including Salmon, Placid, Seeley, Inez, Alva and Rainy Lake, it has historically produced seven to nine chicks per year. In 1999 five chicks were hatched on three of these lakes. This is their story.

Loon Watch 99

Loons winter on the ocean. In Montana they usually return to their summer breeding grounds in April when the ice goes off. Bald eagles share the same habitat as loons due to their common link to their prey base, fish. By the time our loons returned the eagle pair at Salmon Lake had been on their nest since late February. Seeley's eagles settled into nesting on March 12. When the eagles returned to Seeley only a small circle of ice at the mouth of Deer Creek had melted. By April 19 the north end of the Seeley was ice-free. Complete ice off was officially declared on April 25.

The first loon was seen on April 23. Our lone loon contentedly fished on the lake unconcerned that he was alone. He could yodel, aggressive calls made only by males. The unmistakable call sounds much like a seagull's cry. Research indicates that male loons have distinct yodel patterns that don't change with time. If an electro-sonogram of our male's yodel was compared to a recording of last year's yodel it would reveal if he were the same loon. Since banding can be stressful to loons, recording yodels can be a useful management tool. Due to their distinct yodel patterns it is also speculated that loons can distinguish and recognize the calls of individual birds.

In early May, Lynn Kelly, Montana's "Loon Lady," who monitors Montana's loons for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP), made her annual spring tour of lakes. She reported that loon pairs had returned to Salmon, Alva, Placid and Rainy Lake. Inez had one loon. A pair was present on Inez for a short time between May 22 and 30. Nesting signs were placed around the northwest corner of the lake. Debris was cleared away from possible nesting sites, but the pair did not stay to nest. Inez has not had nesting loons since 1979 when the high concentration of homes on the lake caused the loss of suitable nest sites.

Unrequited Love

The Seeley loon remained alone for four more weeks. The fact that he returned before females is not unusual. Male loons often return to their summer breeding grounds earlier than females. It was unusual that he was alone so long. On May 11 two other loons arrived. Loons return to the same territory year after year throughout their thirty-year life span. You might say they are married to the lake rather than to each other. If one of the nesting pair doesn't return due to death or illness the remaining loon will pick a different mate. If something happens to both of them, a new pair may take over the territory.

Seeley's three loons enjoyed each other's company for a couple of weeks until Cupid drew back his bow and chose two to pair up. For several days the third loon tried to remain with them, but they aggressively chased it away. Eventually the third loon left and our pair began their courtship rituals of bill dipping, circling and diving together.

Working Groups

An important way to insure that Montana will always have loons is to make sure that they continue to hatch and raise chicks here. To accomplish their part of the deal loons work hard. Many people around the state work hard too. This year brought the formation of the Montana Common Loon Working Group (CLWG), which undertook the technical aspects of loon management.

One of the first things the CLWG did was instigate a Spring Loon Count. On the first weekend in May, Montana Loon Society (MLS) members counted loons on their lakes. This was the first year that a spring count was conducted. Similar to the Loon Day count in July, the spring count is a supplemental count and provides helpful information on mating and nesting. In the Clearwater Drainage, my husband, Tim, and I counted a pair of loons each on Alva, Rainy and Seeley Lake.

Destination Unknown

During this time Lynn received a report that a Yellow-billed loon in winter plumage was seen on Lake McDonald in Glacier National Park on April 24. To verify that it was a Yellow-billed loon, Lynn traveled to Glacier. Yellow-billed loons breed in the high Arctic tundra and winter on the Pacific coast and are occasionally seen inland. They are similar to Common loons in color, but they are larger, have bright yellow bills and a definite bump on their foreheads. Two previous confirmed sightings of Yellow-billed loons in Montana occurred in January of 1987 at Giant Springs on the Missouri River near Great Falls and in November of 1994 at Fort Peck. Lynn's visit confirmed that the loon in Glacier was a Yellow-billed. It would have been fun to see. One would normally have to travel to northern Canada or Alaska to see one. The Yellow-billed loon stayed until May 2 and disappeared.

Pray for Rain

Montana's nesting loons are helped most by cool, rainy weather. This usually keeps water recreation out of nesting territory until late June when the nesting season is over. This year on the weekend before Memorial Day the temperatures soared into the eighties. Next to flooding, which can wash eggs off nests, unusually warm, spring weather is harmful because it encourages water enthusiasts to be on the lakes during nesting season.

The warm weather caused predictable results at Salmon Lake. Saturday afternoon fifteen watercraft ranging from rubber rafts to speedboats were counted at the north end of the lake above Sourdough Island. The Loon Nesting Sanctuary signs were in place. A jet skier used them as an obstacle course. Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks (MFWP) sited the operator.

Salmon Lake, the last lake of size at the lower end of the Clearwater Drainage is little more than a wide spot in the river. It is not more than a fourth of a mile wide at its widest. It snakes along a narrow canyon for about five miles. It isn't deep as is evident by its many islands. It is lower in elevation than the upper lakes and is one of the first lakes to thaw in spring.

Salmon's loons had been observed in courtship behavior the week before the hot weekend. Over that weekend only one loon was seen. It was hoped that the other was on the nest, but that was never verified. The following week no loons were found on Salmon. One loon was seen on May 30, but the pair never returned. It is not known where they went or if they nested elsewhere. Salmon's loons have not successfully raised chicks since 1995, but until this year they have always had a nesting pair. The situation will be closely watched this year. Since loons return to their natal lake failure to produce chicks means a future crop of young birds will not identify with that lake.

Pure Pressure

MFWP and the Forest Service recognize the increasing human pressure on the Clearwater Drainage. They are taking a "heads-up" attitude towards our lakes. Last year they co-sponsored a water safety officer. The officer's duties included enforcing MFWP boating and fishing regulations, as well as enforcing Forest Service natural resource regulations. The Water Safety Officer will monitor our lakes again this year, especially on weekends. With our growing human population they are also taking a serious look at Montana's long standing water regulations to see what needs to be updated.

Another problem for Salmon Lake is Highway 83, which wends along the canyon wall just above the lake for most of its length. Last year the Highway Department cleared the cut-slope of avalanche debris at the same time as the hot weather. With the narrow lake, the echo of the canyon, and the sound carrying capacity of water the intrusion could have further stressed the loons. Traffic has never stopped loons from nesting on Salmon before, but it illustrates a point. Citizens of Seeley will have to be careful that the Salmon Lake portion of the scheduled widening of Highway 83 from Clearwater Junction to Seeley not take place during critical loon nesting season.

Loon Watch 1999 - Part 2



By Donna Love

(Editor's note: the following report by Donna Love on loons and their nesting habits and population in the Seeley Swan Chain of Lakes is the second of a three-part series. It will conclude next week.)

May 18, 2000
Seeley Swan Pathfinder
Seeley Lake, Montana

For Your Eyes Only

The loons on Alva were on their nest May 12, but lost their nest by May 29 due to high water. They attempted a late renest around June 8. Loons can lay a second clutch if the first attempt fails, but the second attempt has a high failure rate. After losing a nest they usually pick a different site, Alva's second nest was in the same place as the first one on the northwest shoreline. It seemed strange to see a nest on shore after seeing so many on islands.

Rainy Lake's pair was nesting by May 21, but the nest was outside the sanctuary signs, which had been put around their usual site. The signs were moved, but the nest may have also flooded. No known renest attempt was made.

Placid Lake's loons were observed nesting on May 15. They were the same birds banded on the lake in 1996 and were the only "normal" pair this year. It will be interesting to see how long that pair continues to return to Placid.

Seeley's pair was seen on the nest site on Tuesday, May 25. They were on the same little island as last year in nearly the same place. They appeared to be fighting. First one would be on the nest then the other would hop on top and fight and they'd both roll off. Then they'd repeat the process. After three times they dove and didn't return. Puzzling over their behavior, I was halfway home before it dawned on me that I had just witnessed (and video taped) Seeley's loons mating. On Thursday, May 27 a loon was sitting quietly on the nest while the other

fed in the main waters of the lake. Our loons had finally nested - just in time for the Loon and Fish Festival loon tours on that weekend.

Empty Nest

About the same time that Montana's loons nest, bald eagle chicks hatch. Salmon Lake's eagles produced two gawky, healthy chicks.

On May 26, Seeley's eagles flew back and forth from the lake to their nest with fish dangling from their talons. Then they would stand on the side of the nest bobbing their heads up and down into the nest. This is suspicious behavior signifying that their chicks had hatched.

I was away for the next couple of weeks and when I returned the eagles were gone. The nest was deserted. Occasionally throughout the summer one adult would be seen, but they didn't return to their nest. It would be impossible to say what happened.

Placid Lake?

In June it was evident that only three large lakes in the Clearwater Drainage had nesting loons. Seeley and Alva would hatch late and Placid's chicks were due in mid-June. Placid Lake is a large round, brown-colored lake fed by Placid Creek, which flows through cattle grazing country in the southeastern extension of the Mission Mountains. The lake is a part of the Clearwater Drainage, but isn't on the Clearwater River. Owl Creek, its outlet waters, enters the Clearwater River north of Salmon Lake.

Almost totally surrounded by homes Lynn was especially concerned for Placid's loons. A two story house built on the last bastion of land 25 feet from the shoreline and a stone's throw from the loon's nest could displace them. The lake is now completely surrounded by homes except at its marshy backwaters. Assured by the new owners that the house is intended for use during the months of July and August the MLS will watch Placid's loons carefully in coming seasons. In 1999 the nesting loons were able to pull off two chicks on June 6 and 7.

It's a Boy or a Girl Or Both!

Seeley's chicks were due on June 26, an unfortunate date for it was the first day of a pike-fishing tournament. The tournament had been scheduled for two weeks earlier. Concerned that that would fall in the middle of hatching, MFWP moved the date of the tournament back, but because our loons nested late, the tournament fell on the same weekend that our chicks hatched. It helped that the weather was cool and rainy. Boater turnout was not substantial. The few that were there were fishing in the loon's nursery area near the nest. We find this slightly ironic. To protect their chicks loons chase big fish out of their nesting and nursery areas.



On June 26 one loon parent was on the nest and beside it the other parent was swimming around a small black dot. The nesting loon got off the nest and swam by the black dot. The other loon stretched and dove. The remaining loon got back on the nest and the black dot hopped up beside it. Hey, wait a minute. A black dot can't do that. We had a chick! The nesting loon took quite a while to settle in. That evening one restless parent was still sitting on the nest wiggling around.

On the morning of Sunday, June 27 three boats moved through the north end of the lake for the 2nd day of the tournament. One loon was swimming near the boats in a neck stretched up, alert position. It paddled slowly and didn't dive. It's possible that the chick was with it. On Monday the adult loons were in the nursery area at the northeast corner of the lake. Two chicks were with them. This was cause for a celebration. Last year Seeley only had one chick.

Breaking Records

Now Placid and Seeley had two chicks each and we had one lake to go. Alva's late re-nest attempt was successful so far. The big worry was the Fourth of July weekend. No chicks in Montana had ever been hatched after the Fourth of July. Cool, rainy weather kept the lake quiet. On July 6 the Forest Service Campground Host reported seeing one chick.

On the evening of July 7 and the loon family was far from the nest and too far away to verify if they had chicks. The campground-host still reported seeing only one chick. Tim, my husband and I returned on July 8 with a canoe. The loon pair was closer and it was evident that they only had one chick. We attempted an egg hunt as we had last year on Seeley, but we were in for a big surprise.

Instead of an egg in the nest we found a tiny dead loon chick lying on its side beside its eggshell and egg sac, which is an inner lining to the egg that looks like a thick, white, deflated balloon. It is possible that the chick was the second chick that hatched because the parents hadn't removed the shells and sac from the nest. They do this to keep predators with a keen sense of smell from finding the nest. The downy, dark brown chick looked perfectly formed, with miniscule bill, soft brown eyes, miniature wings and little webbed feet. The only visible problem was a half-inch slit from the base of its bill down its throat. As we retrieved the chick, shells and sac, we noticed tiny dried fish lying beside it evidence that the parents had tried to feed it.

The shells and sac were sent to Maine where they will be tested for contaminants such as methylmercury. The chick will be mounted and put with the loon already on display at the Seeley Lake Ranger Station. The taxidermist at Bird Works in Missoula thought that the opening in its throat might have had something to do with its death. We requested that the chick be mounted by May so that it could be on display for the Loon and Fish Festival. Even though it died, its sibling has the notoriety of being the latest hatched loon chick in all of Montana.

Loons Count

On Loon Day, Saturday, July 17 MLS members counted loons on their area lakes. We counted loons on Seeley Lake and then, Tote where a loon had been seen in the spring. Tote Lake is a large pond on Woodworth Road. It isn't big enough to support a loon family, but can be used by loons foraging for food. No loons were there. We also were assigned counting loons on Marshall Lake, where the Forest Service lynx researchers reported seeing a pair. We found two.

Marshall Lake is high on the east side of the Mission Mountains. The road around it is high above the lake. Looking down from that vantage point we could watch the loons swimming underwater. To swim, loons don't "dog paddle." They swing both feet out and back in unison. On the return stroke they swing their legs in and forward. They do not use their wings to swim. In the clear mountain lake we could see this completely.

Loon Watch 1999 - Part 3



Donna Love at a loon talk with loon costume for a youngster.

May 25, 2000
Seeley Swan Pathfinder
Seeley Lake, Montana

By Donna Love

(Editor's note: the following report by Donna Love on loons and their nesting habits and population in the Seeley Swan Chain of Lakes is the final installment of a three-part series.)

The Pea Green Boat

After counting loons we returned home to find Pat Dolan, a biologist for the Forest Service and Marcia Dunn, of KUFM radio watching loons on Seeley. Marcia was gathering information for her children's program, The Pea Green Boat. Because a sunny, warm weekend always increases water recreation, fishermen had displaced the loon family from their nursery area. They found a calm place near the Forest Service dock. Standing on the hill above the dock we had ringside seats to the loons while Marcia interviewed us for her show. The adult loons swirled in tight circles in an alert position with the chicks between them. They could not feed or rest all afternoon. Boats frequently frightened them. This sent them into their various distress calls of tremolos and wails. Marsha was able to tape their calls. Later, Lynn arrived and was also interviewed. Marsha had enough information to dedicate a whole week of one-hour shows to the needs of Montana's loons. The show aired in August and reached hundreds of children. It was a terrible day for the loons, but a great day for loon education.

Tools of the Trade

Pat and Lynn both had their telescopes with them. They were able to verify that neither of the adult loons was banded. That was important. In 1998 when I reported that I might have seen a band on the female I was wrong. I couldn't have seen a band for the adult female banded on July 7 in 1997 was found dead at Sand Island, CA in August of 1998. It was suspected that it did not migrate due to ill health or injury. This means that in 1998 we did not have a banded female on the lake. Without bands it is impossible to know (without expensive DNA testing) if the same birds returned this year. I learned an important lesson. Using binoculars to look for bands is not enough. This year the Forest Service generously allowed me to use one of their field scopes for the summer.

Loon banding is an important management tool. The MLS would like to band 10 percent of Montana's loons or about 20 birds. At the present we have banded 13. Banding is expensive, because the biologists come from Maine, but it is revealing much needed information. The Alva Lake adult female banded on July 9, 1996 was found alive and watched for a month from March 10 until mid April at Morro Bay, CA. Then she returned to Alva to nest. Finding both the Seeley Lake female and the Alva Lake female in California is significant. We can now say with some certainty that our loons winter off the coast of California. Until now we did not know for sure where they spent their winters.

Get the Lead Out

In early August a family vacationing at their cabin on Placid Lake reported that one of the loons had what looked like a fishing lure attached to it. Bill Koppen, the local game warden arranged a night tour of the lake on August 6 to see if we could get close enough to see the problem and possibly capture the loon. We did not find the loons that night. Lynn, unavailable during this time, later speculated that since both adult loons on Placid are banded the bands might have been mistaken for lures. Bill and Barry Cummings, the Water Recreation Specialist, made another attempt to find the problem on Personal Watercraft during the daytime on Sunday, August 8. They couldn't find a problem, but they reported that there was only one chick. A return trip to the lake on August 19 also revealed only one chick. It is not known what happened to the other one.

This episode illustrates an important point. Loons can get caught in wads of fishing line and can also catch lures in their mouth. It is important that fishermen keep their fishing line picked up and that they use steel sinkers instead of lead. Lead ingested by loons (or other waterfowl) can cause lead poisoning, which disrupts the nervous system effecting the birds' ability to fly, feed or breed. Steel sinkers are becoming readily available in many sporting good stores.

Formation Flying

If you want to see a flying loon, go to Alva Lake on an August morning. With three lakes in close proximity they come and go from the lake all morning. There you will see why loons are called the "Concorde" of birds. Like the jet they fly fast cruising at 100 miles per hour with continual swift wingbeats. They can't swoop and soar like birds that hunt for their food in the air nor can they make quick turns and dives like birds that catch their food in flight. They fly straight to their destination. Because they are built for living on water they only have enough flight feathers to get airborne. If even three of these feathers are damaged they can not take off.

Last fall on Rogers Lake near Kalispell a stranded loon with damaged flight feathers could not migrate. The icy waters of the lake closed in on it. Residents of the lake used chainsaws to cut through the ice to get to the loon. By spotlighting it at night they caught it. The loon was released at Somers Bay on Flathead Lake, which doesn't freeze over. Hopefully, the loon will be able to survive the winter until its spring molt when it will grow a new set of flight feathers.

Olympic Swimmers

By August Seeley's chicks had become known as Bold Baby and Clingy Baby because the larger chick was always off on its own while the smaller one rarely left Mama's side.

On the morning of August 26 Clingy Baby and Mama were feeding near the Ranger Station. Bold Baby was in the middle of the lake. A ski boat traveled up the lake from the south. Mama dove and came up with a fish. She hurriedly paddled to the nursery area above the canoe landing (about a fourth a mile) with the fish held firmly in her mouth. Clingy Baby followed trying to get at the fish. When they got to the nursery area, Mama gave the fish to Clingy and dove coming up next to Bold Baby. She tricked the second chick into following her the same way. By the time the boat arrived, both babies were safe in the nursery. I do not know how fast loons can swim underwater. Judging from this, it must be very fast.

Snow Birds

Labor Day Weekend is always a trial for the loons. We were away so we couldn't watch how they fared. When we returned the chicks were fine. The adult male was no longer around, but he had been an attentive father all summer, not leaving as much as last year's male had. We suspect that was because there were two chicks this year and his help was necessary.

With the arrival of fall, Mama's lovely black and white breeding plumage changed to gray and white. The change will help protect her on her ocean winter home from orca whales and sharks, which eat loons. To prepare for migration the loon chicks began flying lessons. Loon books say that loon chicks don't engage in playful activity. But on one September morning Bold Baby looked like he was thoroughly enjoying flight school.

Loony Meeting

On September 26 the Montana Loon Society's annual meeting was held in Polson. It had been a busy year for the Society. In March Lynn had been named Wildlife Biologist of the Year by the Montana Chapter of the Wildlife Society at their annual meeting in Bozeman.

In cooperation with MFWP, the Forest Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Avista Corporation, and the American Bird Conservancy, the Society will be hiring a "Loon Ranger" this summer. The position is a student internship through Montana universities or colleges. The job, which is centered in Seeley, will include loon education, management of sanctuary signs and analysis of data. The Loon Ranger will work from June to August. If you have a chance to meet the new Loon Ranger tell them how much you appreciate what they are doing for Montana's loons.

The Society also wrote and produced a new Boater-Education Brochure titled "Responsible Watercraft Use and Montana's Loons." The brochure explains the various ways that careless boaters can harm loons and offers specific instructions on how to avoid disturbing nesting loons and nurseries. Individuals or groups interested in obtaining a copy of this brochure or to receive membership information can contact the Montana Loon Society at 406-677-3767. Membership is \$15.00 a year. New members will receive a membership packet of information on loons. Membership fees are used for loon management and education. A combined Membership to the MLS and the North American Loon Fund (NALF), the international organization for loons can be obtained at a special low rate of \$35.00 per individual (a savings of \$5.00). New members to NALF will receive their wonderful poster that describes the various behaviors of loons and their needs.

Last Loon Calls

In October we were still seeing our loons. On Columbus Day, October 11, all three loons were swimming together when a canoe approached them. One of the loons began to call a weak yodel meaning that at least one of the chicks was a male, perhaps Bold Baby.

On October 15 we had our first snow. Ducks and geese began to return in large numbers. Mama loon still protected her chicks. A flock of migrating ducks circled and mistook the loons for friendly folk. When the ducks landed beside the loon family Mama rose up in her "penguin dance" and ran across the water charging the ducks. It is easy to see why a loon lake is not a duck lake.

We saw the three loons for the last time on October 22. When loons migrate they do not fly in formation. They travel in small groups of 10 to 15 birds that loosely stay together occasionally calling to each other. They fly during the day and raft up on large bodies of water at night to feed and rest with other migrating loons. Our chicks will stay on the ocean for at least three years. If they survive they will return to Montana and take their place in the breeding process. When they return it is hoped that they will find places on Montana's lakes suitable for their nesting needs. Our job is to make sure that they still can.