

Loon Watch – 2002

|By Donna Love

Last year's loon season started sooner than usual when the loons returned on April 19 and quickly settled into nesting. Our loon ranger, Tim Dykstra, returning for his third season, wasn't on board yet, causing a flurry of activity for the rest of us as we struggled to find time to place the loon nesting sanctuary signs.

A loon is not good at walking on land and only goes on land to nest. It feels safer in the water. If boaters get too near to the nest, a loon will leave. If startled, it might kick the eggs off the back of the nest with its large webbed feet so we sign the general area to ask the public to please stay back. Last year in Montana only 25 pairs hatched 36 chicks so each nest is important. The signs are only in during nesting season.

Shortly after placing signs, the late, high elevation run-off flooded most of the nests, however Placid Lake has a dam at the outlet so when folks there saw the water rising they released some and saved the nest.

Our loon pair on Seeley Lake didn't attempt a second nest until after the annual Alpine Artisans' Loon and Fish Festival on Memorial weekend, confounding loon tours. The pair finally renested in June, and on July 4th successfully hatched one chick, which we promptly nicknamed Liberty.

Placid Lake had two chicks from their first nest, and Rainy Lake had two on their second attempt. Alva was a disappointment. It didn't have chicks even though they renested. The cause was never determined.

In addition to the Clearwater drainage's five nests we added three lakes from the Condon area. Folks there wanted a loon ranger, too, so our ranger began regular tours of three lakes, Holland, Lindbergh, and Pierce Lake. Holland is too high in elevation to have nesting loons, but frequently has foraging loons. Lindbergh might have as many as two nesting pairs, but the lake is four miles long and the nest sites can only be gotten to by boat.

Pierce is a small lake on the National Forest system and is surrounded by recreation cabins. It is one of only a few Montana lakes with an artificial nesting platform. Residence there requested one when they noticed that their own dogs chased the loon off the lakeshore nest. The platform was placed out from shore and this year an otter played on it so often that residents worried that it was keeping the loon from nesting. When the loon was ready to nest it chased the otter away.

Our loon ranger also watches nine lakes/ponds in the Ovando area, most of which are on private ranch land so they are not signed. Only Upsata Lake, on state land, with its rustic Upsata Lake Lodge and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks' campground on its shore, needs to be signed. Upsata was a disappointment also as its nest was unsuccessful after many years of successful two-chick hatches. It should be noted that on average one in four nests fails naturally. Upsata will receive extra good care by our loon ranger, Tim, who is returning for his fourth season.

In all, the Seeley Lake area had five chicks, Ovando had four, and the Swan had one that we know of. The good news is, with the help of grants and some very nice people who are concerned about the future of Montana's loons, the Swan Drainage (Condon/Swan Lake areas) will have a Loon Ranger of their own this year.

On our annual July *Loon Day*, loon-count, 200 loons were found on 74 Montana lakes.

When autumn arrived our chicks were doing well and to our surprise we received one more. A bird rehabilitator from Potomac released a fledged chick on Placid Lake to complete its recuperation after being found by a passing motorist on Interstate 90 near a marshy area of the St. Regis River near St. Regis. We suspect that it had been hit while flying low over the freeway. It was unhurt, but needed to be released on water so it could continue its migration to the ocean.

A loon is a heavy bird (9-12 pounds) with a 46-inch wingspan so it can't lift its heavy weight into the air without first gaining speed on a water runway. In comparison, a Sandhill Crane, which can take off from land, weighs on average 10 pounds, but has a 77-inch wing span. When the loon chick was stranded on land, even though it wasn't hurt, it couldn't take off.

Lois Bellusci, a resident of the Placid Lake, happened upon the release and offered to watch the chick and report on its progress. The chick stayed on Placid Lake into November. We hope that it made it to its ocean home this time along with all our chicks. To read the full story of the rescued loon chick, please go to the Montana Loon Society's new web site at montanaloons.org and click on Library. The story is titled, *The Living Room Loon*.

And to learn more about loons, contact the Montana Loon Society at P.O. Box 1131, Seeley Lake, Montana. You might also want to attend Seeley Lake's Loon and Fish Festival sponsored by Alpine Artisans on Saturday and Sunday of Memorial Weekend (May 24 and 25) and take a loon tour. The loons have returned and are showing signs of

nesting, but remember...if you are on our lakes this spring, please obey the signs and give the loons some room.