

The Loon Catchers,

2003 Loon Watch

|By Donna Love

Glittering reflected silver moonlight formed a pie-wedge pathway to the egg-shaped moon two days from full sitting above the darkened trees in the western sky. To the north, the mystical aurora borealis projected its multicolored roller coaster lights skyward. On the south shore, a dog barked and a cabin door slammed. In the east, laughter from the Forest Service campground rose and died with the parting “good night, sleep tight” of tired, but happy campers. For the five of us sitting in an open bow boat under a canopy of constellations in the middle of night, in the middle of Seeley Lake last July, it was finally time to catch a loon.

We had been waiting since sundown, first at the Ranger Station and then, as it grew dark, in the boat. We sat in absolute silence so we wouldn't alert the loon family of our presence. While we waited, the moon settled into the arms of the trees, owls hooted, coyotes yapped, and waves, tickled into ripples by a gentle breeze, slapped softly at the metal boat.

Sitting in the boat's bow, loon researcher, Lucas Savoy, of Biodiversity Research Institute, a privately owned environmental agency in Maine, led our team. A young Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks biologist learning to capture loons, sat next to him. Boat handler, Scott Tomson, a forest service wildlife biologist, piloted the boat. Lynn Kelly, Montana's loon expert and educator, and I, a loon enthusiast and lake resident, sat in back. As “loon handlers” it was our job to hold onto a captured loon as we roared to

shore for processing. In another boat a short distance away, five more loon catchers also waited.

We were catching loons as a part of a three-year, large scale, co-operative study made possible by a unique partnership of federal, state, and private organizations. The partnership included the Montana Loon Society, the Lolo, Flathead, and Kootenai National Forests, Plum Creek Timber Company, and the Montana Department of Natural Resources. In addition, Montana Fish, Wildlife, and Parks Native Species Program supported the effort with funds originating from federal offshore oil and gas leases granted to various states for native species work.

During the previous three nights loons had been caught and banded on several lakes near Kalispell. On this night, working in the Clearwater Drainage 90 miles south of Kalispell, we were banding loons on two lakes, Placid and Seeley.

Now, if you think it is easy to catch a loon imagine catching a bird that can swim, fly, and dive quite well. Years ago, frustrated researchers discovered the trick. Loons could be captured at night using spotlights, but only when they have chicks. The spotlights attract and confuse the birds, and the parents stay on the surface to protect their offspring thus allowing their capture. But the chicks can't be too young or the banding may harm them. If they are too old the parents may abandon them. One-month old chicks, about half the size of their parents, are the perfect age.

Montana has approximately 200 loons, but only 24-26 nesting pairs successfully hatch and raise one to two chicks a year. Out of the four nests in the Clearwater Drainage two lakes had chicks the right age, Placid and Seeley Lake. Seeley's loons hatched one chick in early June so on the night of the capture, July 5, our chick was a little over four

weeks old, and Placid Lake, also had one chick. Rainy Lake lost its nest to high water and didn't re-nest. The Alva Lake pair also lost their nest, but re-nested and had two chicks still too young for banding. (Salmon Lake and Inez have not had nesting loons for many years.)

After identifying lakes with chicks, a loon catcher must find a loon. At dusk, our loon family was on the far shore, opposite the ranger station. To find out if the loons were still in the vicinity, (loons with chicks are territorial), the researchers played tape recordings of loon calls. Under normal circumstances, this should not be done. It can confuse the birds, but we needed to know where they were. Finally, our loons answered back and we slowly advanced in their direction, all the while scanning the water's surface with battery operated spotlights. The second boat tooled along beside us also using spotlights. To anyone watching from the shore that didn't know what we were doing this would have seemed a strange sight indeed.

Within moments our boat spotted the black and white checkered, adult male swimming alone. As we putted towards the bird, the researchers whistled and clucked, imitating a loon chick calling to its parents to lure the loon close to the boat, which it couldn't see behind the lights. In response the loon turned and swam towards us. When the loon approached, the researchers made a sweep at it with their large, soft capture net, but the bird caught sight of the net and dove, speeding away just under the water's surface like a shot arrow past the back of the boat, and surfaced a short distance away. It's a known fact that loons can swim fast underwater, but that made a believer out of me.

After a couple more tries, each try followed by a short pause to allow the loon to rest, we finally had the loon in the net. Then suddenly, I found the loon, net, water and all in

my lap. Lynn quickly covered the loon's head with a soft towel, while I held its body. Clutching the bird firmly, trying to get its wings under control, I felt like a child carrying her pet goose to the county fair. Several more hands shot forward to help and in an instant the bird was calmed. We tried to remove the bird from the net, but it was too hard to see in the dark, so we motored back to the dock as quickly as possible, leaving the other boat to catch the adult female and chick. On shore, a couple of tidy snips at the net webbing released the bird.

After removing the bird from the net, the researchers let the loon's feet dangle in the cool lake water dockside. They explained that a loon regulates its body heat through its feet. After it cooled sufficiently the bird was brought to shore where it was measured from tip to tail with interesting instruments that miraculously appeared out of a specially packed soft work bag. Lynn held the bird, careful to keep its head covered and its bill under control. Using headlamps and flashlights to see, blood and feather samples were taken and identification bands were placed around its ankles. These bands tell researchers many important things about Montana's loons. The first Montana loon banding was done in 1996-97 when seventeen loons were banded around the state. One of the loons has since been found off the coast of California, another was watched for over a month during the winter at Morrow Bay, California and a chick was found on the Snake River. Before that, biologists didn't know for sure where Montana's loons spent their winters. Now they know that our loons follow large waterways to the Pacific Ocean and winter off the Coast of California. This year's banding will give us an indication who our loons are related too, Canada's and Alaska's, or the Eastern States, and tell us many other things as well.

Finally, our loon was wrapped in a towel, placed in a soft bag and weighed. This procedure was done last as it seems to be the most stressful for the bird. The bird was then uncovered and carried to the end of the dock for release. When its feet hit the water, it raced away and dove. The whole capture had taken only a few minutes.

I looked at my watch. It was now 1:30 in the morning and we still had one more loon and chick, and one lake to go. The other boat couldn't locate the female and chick so they decided to go move on to Placid Lake while we continued the search for Seeley's female and chick. We captured and processed the adult female quickly repeating the previous capture, and went back for the chick. We never did see it, (perhaps it found the adult male) but to give the new researcher more experience, we captured a golden eye duck that we happened upon so somewhere in Montana there's a banded golden-eye. We searched a bit more for the chick, and when we packed it in, it was close to 4:00 in the morning. The tired researchers then drove to Placid Lake to join the other researchers, and to fall into bed in a cabin generously offered by cabin owner, Alan Davis. Damp and chilled I crawled into bed by my sleeping husband and dreamed about loons.

During the 2003 banding, we banded 32 loons on 13 lakes. All the loons were banded without incident. Our loon family was seen swimming peacefully together in the morning.

Before I close, I'd like to say good bye to our previous loon ranger, Tim Dykstra. Tim was a junior in college when he joined us, and completed four loon seasons with us, even returning while in graduate school.

This year we are pleased to introduce two new loon rangers, Luke Lamar, in the Swan, and Don Merrit, in the Clearwater/Blackfoot. Both are juniors studying wildlife

biology at the University of Montana, and are familiar with the area. Luke is from Condon, and has served as the recreation ranger in the Mission Mountains for the Swan Ecosystem Center. Thanks to the Condon folks, Northwest Connections, and Alpine Artisans, who gave so generously, Luke is able to be a loon ranger for the first six weeks of the summer, and then fulfill his duties as a recreation ranger. Don Merrit, in Seeley Lake, has lived at the ranger station and worked on the lynx crew for the past three years. We are so pleased to have both these gentlemen on board and look forward to another great loon year. Rainy, Alva, Seeley, and Placid are already on their nests.

If you would like to learn more about Montana's loons, visit the Montana Loon Society Web site at montanaloons.org, or attend the Seeley Lake Loon and Fish Festival, Saturday and Sunday, May 29-30, at the Seeley Lake Community Hall. Loon walks, talks and tours are available.

