

LOON WATCH 2005: The Loon's Language  
|By Donna Love

The Chippewa, one of the largest tribal groups in North American, were skilled fishermen that lived in the forest country around the shores of the Great Lakes. They crafted many items from the plentiful birch bark that grew in the northern forest. One of their specialties was the birch bark canoe, which is the type of canoe that most of us envision when we think of American Indian canoes.

*Hiawatha*, the epic poem that American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote in 1855 was based on the customs of the Chippewa, which included many legends involving the common loon, a bird they were intimately familiar with. This is acknowledged in the section of the poem when Hiawatha is called “Mahn-go-taysee”, the brave loon heart.

Since the Chippewa lived in isolated areas they had few battles with European settlers so many of their legends are still known today. One Chippewa legend, greatly abbreviated, goes like this:

“In the beginning, Creator gave all creatures the same language and the ability to feel happy. These were wonderful gifts, but soon each sought only their own happiness. Creator could not stay where there was fighting so he had to leave. As Creator canoed away Loon swam after him and begged him to give them another chance. Creator said he would return when there was an end to the fighting. He asked Loon to call to him when peace was restored. After Creator departed, the creatures tried to talk to each other. They couldn't. Creator had taken away their common language. Only Loon was allowed to

keep the original language so he could call to Creator when peace was restored. Until then, Loon's voice will always be sad."

This legend shows many things about the Chippewa. It shows how they felt towards the separation and possible reconciliation of Creator and creation. It also shows that they were an observant people. They knew common loons well and they probably understood the loon's four basic calls.

The first call is the *hoot* that lets other loons know where it is. The hoot says, "I'm over here and I'm doing fine. How are you?" Then another loon hoots back. "Things are great. Keep in touch."

The male loon has a *yodel*, a call that sounds like a seagull's cry, to defend its territory. It says, "This is my place. You have to choose another place."

The *wail*, the loon's most famous call and the one heard on many television commercials and movies, warns of danger. When the wail is sounded the loon family hurries together. It means "Gather together - we might need to help each other out."

The *tremolo* is a laugh like call that is used when the loon is afraid. It means simply, "I'm afraid."

These four calls are what the Chippewa called the "original language," and if you think about it, a loon's language has everything in it that anyone would ever need to communicate with others – a sort of "All I Ever Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" kind of thing. Four simple calls that communicate four basic statements; "I'm over here," "This is my territory," "Danger approaching," and, "I'm afraid." If we were as good at communicating these basic sentiments as loons are, perhaps more effective communication could take place in our lives.

I used to rush outside when I heard the loons calling. I don't anymore. I know what their calls mean. The hope is that Montana's grandchildren, and her great grandchildren will be able to hear and learn from the call of the loon, too.

It isn't for lack of trying. The Montana Common Loon Working Group manages loon data and oversees the loon ranger program. The Montana Loon Society provides funds and volunteers, but each year due to increasing recreation, it gets harder. Last year, Loon Ranger, Jennifer Lund, monitored 17 lakes in the Blackfoot/Clearwater drainage, but only five lakes had nesting loons, including Rainy, Seeley, Placid, Shoup, and Coulbourn. Of those, only three chicks survived one each on Rainy Lake, Seeley Lake, and Placid Lake.

However, some things are going well. The 33-acre "no-wake zone" at the north end of Seeley Lake was a success as far as people are concerned. Not one discouraging word was heard, and those recreating on the canoe trail were extremely grateful to paddle safely across the lake.

In addition, the two loon trunks that the Montana Loon Society put together with a grant from the Plum Creek Foundation, turned into three when the Salish/Kootenia Tribe in Pablo saw them, and wanted one of their own. A trunk was duplicated for them, which they personally paid for. Now three trunks are available for use in the state so education efforts are expanding.

For the Swan, even bigger news. The Swan Land and Water Conservation Fund proposal for this year includes 2,680 acres of Plum Creek lands that the company has offered for conservation sale to the public. In addition, The Swan Forest Legacy Program conservation easements and acquisitions proposal includes acquisition of 1,655 acres of Plum Creek lands within the Swan River State Forest. These will hopefully take place

with the U.S. Forest Service's regional request for a \$16.2 million appropriation in FY07 from the Land and Water Conservation Fund, as well as the State of Montana's request for \$6.2 million in FY07 from the Forest Legacy Program.

For now, loons have been seen on area lakes since ice-off on April 17. Seeley Lake's male that was banded in 2003 has returned and was recently joined by perhaps what will become his mate for the season.

The new loon ranger this year in the Blackfoot/Clearwater area is Ben Chappelow, a senior graduating with a Wildlife Degree from UM. Andrew Gundlach, a UM senior studying wildlife, will work in the Swan. These young men will monitor our loons from about May 13 to July 15.

If you would like to know more about common loons please attend the Seeley Lake Loon and Fish Festival on Saturday and Sunday, May 27 and 28. A variety of loon walks and talks are available. Until then, "Hoot!"