

Loon Watch 2008

Loon Chicks and Ranger Rick

Story and Photos by Donna Love

Another spring has arrived and with it, Montana's loons have arrived, too!

It's always nice to see our loons. Abundant in Canada, we have only 200 common loons in Montana and out of those only about thirty pairs nest and raise a family each year. So we take our looning seriously. Last year we were very happy. It turned out to be a great loon year for the Clearwater/Blackfoot drainage. As opposed to 2007, when we only had one chick (the one on Seeley Lake), last summer, we had eight chicks on six different lakes. In the Blackfoot near Ovando, one privately owned lake had two chicks. In the Clearwater drainage, Clearwater Lake had a chick for the first time in recorded history, Rainy had two chicks, and Placid had one. Then Alva had a chick, which is the first time in several years. We wonder if Lakeview Campground, the long narrow campground along the east shore of the lake, being shut down for the second year due to Forest Service updates had anything to do with it. The campground will be open for part of the 2009 season, and we hope that the Alva loon pair is established enough to continue to nest there.

On Seeley Lake, our goofy mother loon from 2007 was back in 2008, but now that we know why she's goofy we feel a great sense of awe and respect for her tenacity in the face of her handicap. When we met her in 2007, she kept trying to feed six-inch long fish to her newly hatched chick. Newly hatched chicks need fish that are more like one inch long. In addition, the chick mostly stayed near the adult male. Typically, the female bares

most of the burden of caring for chicks. Nevertheless, the chick survived. When we captured the adult female in June for banding, the mystery was solved. She had an injured bill. Skin was missing near the base of her bill and her top mandible was twisted. Her bill no longer closed all the way, so she could only catch larger fish, which she could eat, but the newly hatched chick couldn't. In her injured state, the male adult picked up the slack and cared for the chick. We wondered if the injured female would make it through the winter and return to breed. Sure enough, she was back in 2008 and with the help of her partner raised another chick. This time we noticed that she was the flyingest loon we've ever seen. If she wanted to go somewhere she flew, even if it was just across the lake. We suspect that was due to her injured bill. She could dive well enough to catch fish, but the twist in her bill might have impeded long distances diving, so she found it easier to fly. We'll watch again this year and see if she shows up.

With our six chicks we were in loon heaven! It was a cold spring and runoff was slow, so the accomplishment was due in part to successful first nest attempts. (High water can flood nests, and second nest attempts aren't as successful.) However, we also want to thank last year's lone loon ranger, Naomi Alhadeff, a student intern from the University of Montana for her help. This year, Carrie Sanneman, also a student at the University of Montana, will be joining us as our local loon ranger. We hope she has a great year, too!

Along with our successful loon crop, the Montana Loon Society has some other exciting news. For several years we've wanted to sponsor a Society license plate and we finally accomplished it. Our thanks goes to our membership for their generous donations, Monty Dolack for use of his Loons of the Swan Valley, and Missoula graphic designer,

Eileen Chontos for her lovely design. The plate should be available in July. Proceeds will help the Society complete many future loon projects.

Also, look for two, soon to be famous, Seeley Lake Junior Rangers, Kristan and Spencer Tudor in the July 2009 edition of Ranger Rick Magazine. Naomi and I took the kids looning with us on Rainy Lake in June to help remove loon nesting sanctuary signs. Each one had a turn in the canoe to help paddle and retrieve buoys. I sent the story with pictures to Ranger Rick and they picked it up for "The Buzz," a feature that shows children helping the environment. Way to go, Kristan and Spencer!

To learn more about Montana's common loons please attend Montana Loon Lady, Lynn Kelly's Loon Talk and Walk at the Alpine Artisans Loon and Fish Festival at the Seeley Lake Community Center (near Mile Marker 15 on Highway 83 North). Lynn's Talk and Walk will begin at 2:00 on Saturday afternoon, May 23. In past years, Lynn has Walked in the afternoon and Talked in the evening, but this year there won't be a Saturday evening loon program. You'll get both the Talk and Walk, one right after the other. Lynn's Walk (actually a drive) to a nest site will begin immediately after her Talk at approximately 3:15 or so, so if you can't make the Talk, you can still take the Walk.

If you can't catch Lynn's Talk and/or Walk, you may want to attend my Bird Walk to the Viewing Blind, meeting at the Seeley Lake Ranger Station at 9:00 Sunday morning, May 24. On this trip you'll learn about herons, loons, and ospreys! Either way, you'll have a great time, and may become a bird enthusiast like the rest of us!

Have a fun AND safe summer.