

A Mother's Day Tale

2011 Seeley Lake Loon Watch

By Donna Love

Loons have often been called the “Voice of the Northern Wilderness.” That is true for western Montana, too. We have the most loons of any state west of the Mississippi River. However, that’s still not a lot of loons. We only have about 200 and only about 60 nesting pairs.

That’s not lost on those of us that love loons, but we try to balance the needs of loons with the needs of people. What a loon needs is clean water, a healthy supply of food (mostly fish with some frogs, leeches, crayfish and insects added in for good measure), and a quiet nest site and nursery area.

But even when a loon family has those, they face other dangers from us such as ingesting lead fishing sinkers, harassment from boats and wave runners, and difficulties due to invasive species, such as pike, which eat all the fish, such as salmon and perch that are the right size for a loon to eat, as well as an occasional loon chick, and from invasive plants, such as watermilfoil and others that we are trying so desperately to keep out of our lakes’ waters.

However, even with the difficulties, our loons are still trying to nest here. Take for instance the plucky little Seeley Lake female loon banded in 2007 that had a deformed bill. It looked like her bill was hurt by an injury and had grown in twisted, so it couldn’t close all the way.

When that steadfast loon mother arrived in 2007, we didn’t know she was hurt, but it soon became apparent that something was wrong. She was observed trying to feed six inch long fish to her chicks, which is much too large a fish for a baby chick to eat. Soon, her chicks were spending most of their time with Dad, who fed them tiny fingerlings that they could eat. Then Dad and Mom seemed to switch rolls and Mother became the one to keep a close eye out for the bald eagle while the chicks rested on Dad’s back. Only one chick survived, which isn’t unusual for any loon pair, and when it was older and it could handle food the size Mother offered, then both Mom and Dad could feed the chick.

For some reason that loon family working together as hard as they could to raise their chicks reminded me of a photograph I saw in a National Geographic a few years back. In the photo, a third-world wife and mother with several young children circling her carried her husband who was missing his legs from the knees down, piggy-back across a long beach to their fishing boat so he could fish for the family through the day. Each day, she carried him to the boat and when he returned, she carried him back. That’s dedication.

In this same way, Montana’s loons are trying hard to stay here and raise their families, while facing increasing difficulties, many of which are caused by humans, such as more recreation, lead poisoning, and invasive species.

Well, I wish the end of this loon story was a happy one, but sadly its not. The hurt female loon died last summer. She was found by boaters on July 25 who heard the male loon calling and calling, splashing and diving and acting so distressed that the boaters went to investigate, and found the dead female. Although loons don’t mate for life – it’s more like they marry the lake – these two were a pair for several years, so of course the mate was distressed. It will be interesting to see if he returns this year and who his new mate will be.

Not knowing what to do, the boaters contacted the Seeley Lake Ranger Station. Forest Service biologist Scott Tomson recovered the bird. He sent the loon to be necropsied, but by the looks of her, Scott felt she possibly died from starvation. Her keel (breast bone) protruded out of her chest suggesting that she was emaciated and died of hunger. She might have finally succumbed to her deformity.

However, for five years, that lovely little female gave her all, trying to raise chicks even in her hurt state. Loons usually dive and swim underwater to get somewhere fast. She couldn’t even do that. She took off and flew whenever she had to cross the lake. Her open bill probably threw off her swimming ability. She had



Female loon banded on Seeley Lake in 2007 with hurt bill. Photo Donna Love

produced one chick in 2007 that survived, 2 in 2008, one in 2009 and in 2010 she had two chicks, but neither survived. Last year in 2011, even though it was a high flood year, she hatched two chicks. One died fairly soon after hatching, and the other at about three weeks of age. Possibly she was struggling by this time to feed and take care of them, but she was trying.

So, while our loons are trying so hard, let's try a little harder, too. Be patient while the boat inspectors inspect your boat (Boats don't have to be inspected if they haven't been out of the drainage), please change to steel sinkers, obey nest signs, and during the rest of the summer give the loons a lot of room as they move around the lake to feed. We need to do these things if we still want to hear the "Voice of the Northern Wilderness" on our lakes.

2011 Clearwater/Blackfoot Loon Numbers

As you look at the chart included with this article, it is important to note that the number of chicks in the state during these same years has remained roughly the same at about 40 chicks per year. When one area has a banner year, such as 2008 for the Seeley Lake area, another area, for instance Kalispell, might not do as well. However, it is cause for concern if any one particular area goes without chicks for a number of years in a row, such as the Ovando area during the years '05-'07. It's great that Ovando loons have rebounded slightly since.

The chick from the Clearwater that survived the loon season in 2011 was from Rainy Lake, and the three chicks in the Ovando area were on two different private lakes. The Montana Loon Society closely watches these numbers as an indication of how our loons are fairing in each area.

To help, join the Montana Loon Society or purchase our specialty loon license plate available wherever state license plates are sold. To learn more about Montana's loons, please visit our web site at www.montanaloons.org or attend the Loon and Fish Festival in Seeley Lake on Saturday and Sunday of Memorial Day weekend, May 26 and 27. Have a safe, fun summer – and let's be watching out for our loons!

Loon Chick Counts in the Clearwater/Blackfoot 2000-2011

| Year | Clearwater | Blackfoot |
|------|------------|-----------|
| 2000 | 4 | 2 |
| 2001 | 5 | 4 |
| 2002 | 5 | 4 |
| 2003 | 4 | 5 |
| 2004 | 3 | 4 |
| 2005 | 3 | 0 |
| 2006 | 6 | 0 |
| 2007 | 1 | 0 |
| 2008 | 8 | 2 |
| 2009 | 3 | 1 |
| 2010 | 0 | 2 |
| 2011 | 1 | 3 |

Montana Loon Society Specialty License Plate

