

FAQ's about LOONS

1- Why does that loon have his head underwater?

The loon is probably peering under the water, looking for fish, or maybe it's an adult looking for underwater predators that could harm the chicks. Loons are a visual predator, and therefore must have clear water to find their food or to avoid underwater danger.

2- Do loons mate for life?

Some loons may mate for life. It has been shown, though, that loons do take a new mate in the event of a mate's death or displacement by another loon. About 20% may have a new mate each year. Loons are actually more faithful to a nesting site than to a mate.

3- Does the male's yodel stay the same over time?

It was thought that the males' territorial song, the yodel, remained static and could be used to "voice tag" them, making it easier to study loons and their nesting and territorial habits. Research has proven this wrong as a male that lost his territory to another was found to change his yodel as heard in his voice tag.



4- How long do loons live? Loons are a long lived bird, much like any other low rate reproducing bird such as eagles. They are probably not sexually mature until about 7 years of age, and may live for as long as 30 years.

5- When do loons migrate north? Spring migration begins with loons heading north from their winter homes on the Atlantic coast and the Gulf of Mexico as northern ice recedes. Northernmost males arrive on their home lakes as soon as the ice is out- often within just hours. This implies that they stage on the Great Lakes and other open water areas and scout as the ice goes out. On the more southern lakes (Michigan represents the southern boundary of the Common Loon) most male loons are on territory by around the first of April, assuming ice has already gone out. In both cases, the females follow later. Young birds return for the first time at two to three years of age.

6- A Loon is a duck, isn't it? Or is it a goose? Actually, loons are neither. Though a water bird, a loon is an entirely different kind of duck, er, not a duck. It's a genus called *Gavia*, and the species name of our Common Loon is *immer*. In the old world, loons are called divers. Everyone calls them one of the most beautiful birds ever seen!



'*Gavia immer*'—the Common Loon

Please respect loons and recognize their signs. When in danger, loons give a warning or distress call that sounds like a laugh. Listen for and heed this call which means: "Please move away". If you see a loon "dancing" straight up out of the water, and slapping with its wings, it is **Urgent** that you move away. You are in their territory!

Enjoy loons from a distance. Listen to their lovely, haunting calls. Enjoy the solitude of the lake. Loons need this solitude to breed and raise their young. If loons are gone, your solitude might be slipping away, too....

This document has been compiled with help from the following sources:

- Algonquin Park Online Learning Centre
- Michigan Loon Preservation Association
- Royal Alberta Museum



PO Box 204
Delta ON K0E 1G0
www.lbla.net

THE COMMON LOON

Ontario's official bird



PO Box 204
Delta ON K0E 1G0
www.lbla.net

Known for its haunting calls & striking black & white breeding plumage, the Common Loon uses many Ontario lakes for its summer nesting grounds.

Description

In summer, both male and female Common Loons have black heads that appear almost iridescent, red eyes, a long dark pointed bill, a white necklace around the black neck, and white spots on a dark black back and sides. The Common Loon has a white breast and belly, with dark webbed feet. In winter, adult Common Loons appear similar to young birds, with dark gray heads and back contrasting with a white belly.

One of the oldest species of birds, loons are very heavy because of their solid bones unusual in the bird world. Common Loons are large, goose sized, black and white diving birds that spend their summer on open fresh water lakes and winter on the seacoast. Feeding mostly on fish, loons measure .6 to 1 metre long (2-3 feet), weigh 4-5 kilograms (8-12 pounds) and have a wingspan of 1.2 to 1.5 metres (4-5 feet).

Where to find loons

Common Loons live throughout Canada, in all provinces and territories and in the north-eastern United States during the summer. It is estimated that Ontario has about 65,000 pairs of Common Loons living in the province during the summer months. Near the end of summer, loons will gather on many larger lakes prior to migration. Adults will usually migrate before young birds, which may need additional time to mature before migration. By the middle of November, most loons migrate south or to the Atlantic Ocean, but a few may winter on the Great Lakes.



Critical time: May/June nesting season

Most loons nest from mid to the end of May. Their nests are usually on small islands or the back end of bays and inlets. Loons lay only two eggs, which both parents take turns incubating for 28-29 days.

Loon chicks

Loon chicks rest, feed and grow in and around their territory during the months of June, July and August. Look for them in backwaters and along the shoreline. Chicks use the summer to gain strength to fly south in late October-November.



Boat Traffic Can Cause Loss of Eggs:

Loon parents leave if watercraft come within 150 yards of the nest (the length of 1 ½ football fields), leaving the eggs without warmth or protection. The nest then becomes vulnerable to predators. If disturbed often, loons abandon the nest. A pair may re-nest if it isn't too late in the season, but they only have 2 chances. If you see 2 adult loons together in May or June, their nest site may have been disturbed.



Boat traffic can cause loss of chicks:

Young chicks are not waterproof! They need to be able to climb up on their parents' backs to stay warm and dry. When watercraft approach too closely, parents leave their chicks to defend their territory. Young chicks are buoyant, can't dive quickly to get out of the way, and can be run over. Chicks tire easily. The presence of watercraft causes them to keep swimming instead of feeding and resting. This can weaken them, affecting their ability to survive.

Ways water craft affect loons:

Increasingly disturbed by watercraft, especially personal watercraft, loons are driven from nests, injured, and killed either intentionally or unintentionally. As watercraft numbers increase, loons will be affected even more in the future. Canoes slip quietly into nesting areas and can startle loons off nests. Fishing Boats, especially bass and pike anglers, spend lots of time in waters perfect for nest sites.

Speed Boats can send waves crashing into the shoreline.



both humans and loons continue to share our lakes.

Personal Watercraft can speed in shallow water and may run over chicks. Watercraft operators are naturally drawn to our beautiful lakes and often come into close contact with loons. Responsible watercraft use will help ensure that

Loon Sounds:

Common Loons are best known for their yodel, hoot, wail and tremolo calls. However, the first sound that loons make is a 'peep-peep-peep' that is given by chicks when they are still inside the egg. Loons use their more commonly heard vocalizations for a variety of purposes. For example, the hoot call is used as a contact call as birds approach one another. The tremolo signals distress and may urge loons to move to safety. The yodel is used in territorial disputes, essentially stating to any loons close by: "This is our territory!" Finally, the wail indicates a willingness to interact and is used to re-establish contact between individuals when they have been separated.

Loon Mortality:

Known causes of loon mortality are trauma, drowning in commercial fishing nets, aspergillosis and botulism, mercury and lead poisoning, and others. Lead represents a major hazard for waterfowl. Birds commonly eat small pebbles to grind food for digestion. Small lead sinkers and jigs may be mistaken for these pebbles, or lures with fish and lead attached may be consumed by the bird directly. A bird that eats lead will become ill and die within two or three weeks. Just one lead sinker or jig can poison a water bird.



Once dispersed into lakes, lead may persist for up to 300 years, though speed of degradation depends on soil conditions and other factors. At least 27 different species are known to be affected by lead poisoning, including the Common Loon. The Canadian Wildlife service has demonstrated significant mortality in the Common Loon from ingestion of lead sinkers and jigs.

Major Predators:

Adult Common Loons have few predators. Ospreys have been observed harassing adult and young birds and Bald Eagles have attacked loons while on the water.

Food Sources:

Common Loons feed on fish such as Yellow Perch, Smallmouth Bass, and assorted smaller fishes usually referred to as "minnows". In addition, some loons feed on naturally fishless lakes, which contain crayfish, frogs, leeches and aquatic insects.

Loons hunt by swimming after their prey using their webbed feet. They have been known to dive to depths of 70 metres and stay submerged for more than three minutes, but the average dive is less than five metres deep and 40 to 45 seconds in duration. While still small, young loons travel on the backs of their parents in July and August, as they do not have the stamina to keep up with them. By eight weeks of age young loons are fully feathered and can search for food independently of their parents.



Loons on Lower Beverly Lake

- John Truyens