

## The Not-So-Common, Common Loon

By Joann Wallenburn, Clearwater Resource Council

I decided to write this article so I could learn “why all the fuss about loons”. All I knew about loons was that they are water birds with distinct black and white markings and a unique call that live on some of our lakes in the summer.

“Why all the fuss” was easily answered by looking at a map of where Common Loons live. The Common Loon is the only loon species that lives in Montana. They live along the coasts during the winter and migrate to cold, clear, freshwater lakes in forested regions of the north in the summer. Here in the west, they summer almost entirely in Canada and Alaska, with the exception of a little dip to the south right here in the mountainous region of north-west Montana. Montana has the largest population of the Common Loon in the entire west, and our Clearwater region has one of the largest populations in Montana. Largest doesn’t mean large. On average there are only 200 Common Loons summering in Montana. Having loons here at all is pretty special, and worth the fuss, I think.

Common Loons are large, predatory water birds that live almost entirely in the water, and live to be 20-30 years old. They are 2-3 feet long, weigh around 9 pounds and have a wingspan of 4-5 feet. They have red eyes which aid in seeing fish in the water and large, pointed black bills. Their legs are very far back on their bodies which makes them excellent swimmers and divers, but practically unable to walk on land. To take flight, loons run across the water, into the wind, sometimes as far as several hundred yards. They cannot take off from land or an ice-covered lake.

Common Loons have two suits of clothes. Males and females both have the same colorings. In the winter, while living at the ocean, they have plain grayish-brown feathers over their back, neck and head; belly and throat are white. In late winter, they lose these feathers, including all their flight feathers, and grow a new suit of fancy, breeding plumage. While these new feathers are growing, the birds are unable to fly and are most vulnerable. Their summer breeding plumage is quite striking. They have black and white checkered back, white belly, iridescent black head and neck with a white necklace around the back of the neck and a narrow, white chinstrap under the throat. With their new set of feathers, they head to their summer breeding lakes.

Loons return to the area where they were hatched to breed. They don’t always return to the same lake, often selecting a nearby lake. They arrive just as the ice is melting from the lakes, in late March or April. It was believed that loons mate for life, but banding studies have shown that they will, occasionally, switch mates. Loons build their nests very close to the water, because of their difficulty walking on land. They lay one or two brown, speckled eggs in late April, early

May. Both parents tend the nest, incubating the eggs and defending their territory. If all goes well, 26-28 days later the chicks hatch. If the nest fails early, the pair may lay another egg. Loons only raise one brood per season. Sadly, in Montana, half of the broods fail each year.

Newly hatched chicks are able to swim. The nest is abandoned completely a day or two after hatching. New chicks are covered in a brownish-black down. In the first few weeks of life, they frequently piggy-back on a parent's back. Although the chicks can swim, they chill and tire easily and are tempting prey for large fish, turtles, and raptors. Piggy-backing allows them to rest, warm up, and protects them from predators.

By 12 weeks, the down has been replaced with feathers. The chicks are feeding themselves and have learned to fly. At summer's end, the adults molt into their winter plumage and begin their migration to the coast, leaving the chicks behind. The chicks continue to feed and grow and strengthen their flight feathers for the long flight ahead of them. They stay until nearly ice-in, and then migrate. Montana averages 41 chicks per year that hatch and survive to start this migration. Of these, less than 10 will live to return.

Montana's loons winter along the Washington, Oregon, and California coasts. There they feed on flounder, crabs, lobster, shrimp and other fish. That sounds much more appealing than their summer diet of fish, salamanders, leeches, frogs, snails, and insects. Salt-glands between their eyes help remove excess salt while at the ocean.

Juveniles remain at the ocean for the first three winters of their life, returning to their natal lake area as three-year olds. For the 20% that do live to three years old, the annual survival rate rises to more than 90%. Loons don't breed until they are 7 years old.

Because loons take so long to begin breeding, lay only one-two eggs a year, and because so many eggs fail to hatch and less than 20% of the eggs that hatch live to breeding age, the future of a population at any given lake is precarious. Worldwide numbers of Common Loons are solid, but in our little valley, they are at risk.

Loons are very sensitive to disturbance during nesting and may abandon their eggs if people come too close. Even if they leave the nest for just a short time, the eggs are vulnerable to predators or may get too hot or too cold, killing the developing chick.

Loons build their nest in sheltered bays or on the lee sides of islands or peninsulas. They avoid areas of human development. If you see two loons together in these types of areas in May, you have likely disturbed a nesting pair and frightened them off their nest.

Loons that are alarmed may rise up and thrash about in the water (penguin dance) or call out with a "crazy laugh" sound called a tremolo. Please enjoy watching loons from a distance, especially during nesting and chick-rearing season.

To monitor and protect the loons, several agencies, organizations, and individuals built a coalition called the Common Loon Working Group. The Group defined regions where loons are found and recruited a volunteer for each region to be the Loon Coordinator. Loon Coordinators recruit volunteers in their region to help with loon counts and protecting nesting areas. Patricia Bouta is our Loon Coordinator for the Clearwater River Drainage. She can be reached at 210-4701. The Working Group also created the Loon Ranger program in 2000. Loon Rangers are typically college students who work from mid-May to mid-July monitoring the loons and their nesting activity, and providing outreach and education at public boat launches and to local homeowners associations. This summer, Mike Strickland is our loon ranger. Be sure to say 'hi' and 'thank you' if you meet him. Feel free to contact him with any questions or concerns you may have. Cell: 406 212 7615 Email: montana\_mcs@yahoo.com

Loon counts are taken each year in May and July. In the Clearwater drainage, loons have been found nesting on Alva, Placid, Rainy, Summit, and Seeley. They formerly nested on Clearwater, Big Sky, Inez, and Salmon. Loons may fly to other lakes to feed. "Single" loons, meaning those that are not yet old enough to breed, may be found on other area lakes.

The leading cause of premature death of adult loons is lead poisoning from lead sinkers or jigs. Loons eat pebbles to fill their gizzards to aid in digestion. One small lead sinker mistaken for a pebble will kill an adult loon in just a few weeks.

What a treat to have breeding loons in our valley. Let's hope they continue to live and thrive here. Keep an eye out and you may be lucky enough to see one. Keep an ear out and you may hear their haunting wail. To hear all the sounds of the loon, go to <http://www.loon.org/voice-loon.php>

Postscript: I just spoke with our Loon Ranger and nesting pairs have been seen on Clearwater, Summit, Rainy, Alva, Seeley, Placid and Upsata. How exciting! Please use caution when recreating in these lakes.

Map credit: Annenberg Learner Foundation website [www.learner.org](http://www.learner.org)

Many of the facts cited in the article, along with the photo of the adult loon, were obtained from Hammond, C. A. H. 2009. Conservation Plan for the Common

Loon in Montana. Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Kalispell, MT.