

Looning is So Hard on the Knees: Loon Watch 2004

By Donna Love

The canoe slipped quietly through the black night like a ghost ship gliding on a dark ocean while its occupants silently searched for the loon family.

Loons can only be caught at night and only when they have chicks. If they don't have chicks the adults dive, disappearing into the murky depths where only fish dare to travel.

Several of us stood on the shoreline watching the canoe. We were curious. Can a loon be caught from a canoe?

If you think it's impossible, you are almost correct. It is nearly impossible, but Rainy Lake is so tiny only small craft with electric motors are allowed.

In the end, we only caught the two chicks. Other lakes in the area had lost their first clutch and their chicks were the right age, but Rainy Lake hadn't lost their chicks so they were past the superb age of four weeks, the right age to catch a loon. If the chicks are too young they might be hurt. If they are too old, the parents dive, leaving the chicks to fend for themselves.

And that's just what the Rainy Lake adult loons were doing – leaving the chicks to fend for themselves. After all, a canoe can't move fast, even with a side-mounted electric motor.

It takes three people to catch a loon so it's tricky catching them in a tippy canoe. The boat handler has the best job sitting in the back steering. The front two loon catchers are in for a miserable night of kneeling on the canoe floor, one holding the high powered battery run spotlight and the other wielding the net. They kneel to avoid tipping the canoe so while the processing crew waited comfortably on the shore, the loon catchers wore out their knees.

Soon the canoe came to shore for a leg stretch and a place trade. The next time we saw the canoe, a confused chick, wrapped in a pink towel, was handed up to us and we went to work. Blood samples and measurements were taken, bands placed around its leg.

Then more canoeing...and more breaks...and finally another chick for processing. Loon chicks are about the cutest things on earth. All brownie down with liquid dark eyes, their web feet practically as long as their whole body. Disheveled, but unharmed, the chicks were returned to their water world.

We gave up catching the adults around three o'clock in the morning when the fog settled and the stirring wind made us shiver in our now wet clothes

According to Gael Bissel, a biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, (MFWP) in Kalispell, twenty-two adults and forty juvenile loons have been captured and banded in northwest Montana over the past two summers. The banding is a part of a Loon Ecology Project to determine the status of Montana's loons and to see if our loons are linked to other adjoining populations.

Each loon is banded with four bands (two per leg), using a combination of three colored bands and one metal US Fish and Wildlife Service band. These bands tell us many things.



The new Montana Loon Society educational loon trunk that will be available for teachers to use in the fall of 2005.

The newest item in the educational department is the development of two loon trunks funded by a \$3000 grant that the Society received from Plum Creek Timber Company. The trunks will be available in the fall of 2005 for use by educators. The state is so large one trunk will be stored at MFWP's office in Missoula and one in Kalispell.

In addition, loon volunteers still provide manpower for the summer loon count, help loon rangers throughout the season, and help with banding. So, if you love loons, there's still more to do.

If you'd like to help contact the Montana Loon Society at PO Box 1131, Seeley Lake, MT 59868, or check out our web site at montanaloons.org.

For instance, in April one of our banded loons off the coast of California near San Francisco decided it was time to head back to Stillwater Lake near Kalispell. California loon watcher, Darwin Long, saw it go. He notified Montana loon watchers, who saw it arrive. Its five and a half day trip rocked the Loon World. I laughed. Two summers ago, it took that long to drive home from the Redwoods with grandma and two tired teens. I'd rather have been a loon.

(If you see a banded loon, contact MFWP at their Missoula or Kalispell office.)

Other Loon News...

Other events this year have also rocked the loon world. The North American Loon Fund disbanded after twenty-five years. They were so successful twenty loon groups now monitor loons across the US and Canada.

For instance, in 2000, The Montana Common Loon Working Group, a group of state and federal biologists, formed. Finally, loons are on the radar screen of state and federal governments.

However, there's still much to do. The Montana Loon Society still helps put loon rangers in the field, helps with their training, purchases and repairs loon buoys, and provides educational materials.

As I write, our loons have returned and have been seen on terra firma checking out the view (among other things.) Last year, Seeley Lake raised one chick, Placid Lake, one chick, and Rainy Lake, two. In the Blackfoot area, four chicks were raised.

Our disappointments included Upsata Lake, that hasn't had chicks for three years, and Alva Lake that hasn't had chicks in two years. This occurred even though both lakes had nesting loons. We will watch these situations carefully. It will be a breeze with help from our new loon ranger, Jennifer Lund, a junior at the University of Montana. Early in May she took part in loon training in both Seeley Lake and in Kalispell, and is excited to begin her new job.

Another new addition is the placement of a new no-wake zone at the north end of Seeley Lake. This zone takes in thirty-three acres at the north end of the lake. This no-wake zone is in effect throughout the summer from Memorial Day to Labor Day.

The new no-wake zone went into effect due to the high amount of canoe traffic crossing the lake from the Clearwater Canoe Trail to the take out point on the lakeshore at the Seeley Lake Ranger Station, and to protect wildlife (loons included) habitat.

So, there's lots going on, and as the Montana Loon Society President, Lynn Kelly, wrote in her annual newsletter address, "So, having done everything you can – maintain your sense of wonder. Allow yourself the time to just sit and enjoy the presence of these birds we care so much about and have a wonderful loon year!"



Last year's adult female loon with her chick.