

WORRIED BIRD Its body posture indicating distress, a loon warily eyes an approaching boater. Loon advocates are working to raise public awareness about the need to stay far away from the skittish birds during nesting season in spring and early summer.



CRAZY **ABOUT** LOONS

Citizen volunteers and wildlife biologists work to conserve a remarkable bird that spends more time underwater than in the air. BY LAURA ROADY

Each summer I'm drawn to northwestern Montana's lakes—not for fishing or boating, but for the prospect of seeing and hearing a common loon. Loons are strikingly handsome, with red eyes, a daggerlike bill, and distinctive black-and-white zebra markings on the throat and checkering on the back. Because the fish-eating birds live in clean, deep North Woods lakes, loons have become symbols of unspoiled wilderness. So beloved are they in Canada that their likeness adorns the nation's one-dollar coin, affectionately called a "loonie."

The birds are well known for their haunting call that echoes across the water. It's a sound that reminds me of childhood vacations in northern forests. "I could lie awake for hours listening to it, it is so thrilling," wrote Henry David Thoreau.

In Montana, little was known about the species until the early 1980s. Scientists and citizens had become concerned about loons after reports a decade earlier of DDT accumulating in fish-eating birds. Citizen volunteers conducted a study to define the summer breeding range of loons and the

population? And were the region's growing number of shoreline cabins and homes harming loon habitat?

According to Don Skaar, who led those first loon studies, he and others noticed that many loon nests had been abandoned or contained dead chicks. "We realized that human disturbances were causing loons to leave their eggs or abandon their young," says Skaar, now a senior Fisheries Bureau manager with Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. "Loons typically lay two eggs, but we were finding nests with only one or even no chicks."

SUMMER COUNT

Determining the population trend and the effects of humans on loon nesting success required monitoring the birds each year. In 1986, the newly formed Montana Loon Society launched Loon Day, a volunteer effort to count loons and determine chick survival. The midsummer survey, which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year, recruits volunteers to record loon behavior, locations of loon sightings, numbers of adults and juveniles, nest sites, and other information on 300-plus lakes in northwestern Montana. The volunteers also track loons banded each year since 2003 as part of a long-term FWP study.

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characteristics of lakes where the birds nested. They found that most loons in Montana live north of Missoula and west of the Continental Divide, with a few nesting on the eastern side of the Rocky Mountain Front. The initial estimate of 40 breeding pairs established Montana's loon population as the largest, other than Alaska's, in the western United States.

What was still unknown, however, was whether the population was growing or shrinking. Also: How did motorboats and other disturbances affect Montana's loon

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Chris Hammond, an FWP wildlife biologist in Kalispell who helps coordinate Loon Day, says surveys during the past 15 years have found a relatively stable population of roughly 180 to 200 total loons (which includes 50 to 70 breeding pairs). "That's definitely good news," he says. "It shows the population is about where it should be for the amount of habitat out there."

Good news, yes. But also puzzling. Studies by Lynn Kelly, founder and president of the Montana Loon Society, and biologists in other states show that loons will not tolerate boaters, anglers, and others coming within a few hundred feet of their nests, which usually sit along shorelines of islands and peninsulas.

"When disturbed by an approaching boat, loons typically slip off their nests—leaving the eggs exposed to cold and predators—and they won't return until the boat leaves the area," says Kelly. That should happen more often as more people use northwestern Montana waters. For example, an FWP study found that the number of boats on the Flathead River and associated backwaters more than quadrupled between 1992 and 2008. With more boats on loon waters, why aren't more birds abandoning their nests?

LOON RANGERS

"We can't prove it, but we're pretty confident we are mitigating those effects with public outreach and education," explains Gael Bissell, an FWP wildlife biologist in Kalispell. Each spring since 1989, department staff and Loon Society members place yellow floating signs roughly 100 yards from active nesting sites on about 35 busy lakes. The signs alert boaters to keep their distance during the critical nesting season from early May through late June. In addition,

each summer FWP hires three interns—usually college students—to tour the signed lakes. Known as loon rangers, the interns explain the yellow signs to boaters, give evening presentations at campgrounds, and meet with cabin owners and other lake users to explain why loons need privacy, especially during nesting season. They also clear up common misconceptions. For instance, when a loon makes its "laughing" call as people approach, it's not because the bird is happy. "It's actually a distress call

IMPRESSIVE WINGSPAN

Flapping its wings, a preening loon shows off its distinctive white checkering and spots, which help camouflage it from eagles and other predators.





BE FRUITFUL Left: FWP biologist Chris Hammond releases a study loon captured at Flat-head Lake. Below: Members of the Montana Loon Society place warning signs near a nest. Bottom: Dense bones allow loons to sit lower in the water and dive more easily to catch fish.



that means, ‘Move away!’” says Kelly.

Bissell says the signs, loon rangers, and years of public education by Loon Society members are paying off. “I think the reason Montana’s loon population is stable is because people are learning to leave loons alone so they can reproduce, even in areas with growing public use,” she says. Hammond notes that Ashley Lake, a few miles west of Kalispell, is ringed by more than 400 homes and cabins yet continues to support four breeding pairs of loons. “The homeowners’ association has been essential. Members go out and spread the word to their neighbors and boaters about reducing disturbances to nesting sites,” he says.

Hammond adds that when six-month-old juvenile loons migrate to wintering waters on

as possible each summer to make up for that loss.”

In 2008 FWP changed the status of Montana loons from “at risk” to “potentially at risk.” The upgrade reflects the stable population. But Kelly points out that the state’s loon population is still vulnerable. Though larger than those in most states, Montana’s loon numbers are hardly booming. And because loons don’t breed until age seven, and then produce only one or two chicks each season, “it wouldn’t take much to knock the population down to the point where it couldn’t recover,” she says.

Breeding loon populations in California, Oregon, and Utah became extinct in the mid-



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: FWP; MICHAEL HARING

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the West Coast for their first time each fall, only 17 to 25 percent survive to return to Montana two and a half years later. “That’s why reducing nesting disturbances is essential,” he says. “So many juvenile birds are lost to predators and other natural causes that we need to help loons pump out as many chicks

20th century. With that possibility never far out of their minds, Kelly and other loon advocates remain committed to maintaining the state’s population in the face of growing lake recreation and development. Hammond points out that loons are able to tolerate increasing public use of Montana’s lakes—but

only to a point. “The key is to give them the space they need for nesting and during those first few weeks when the chicks hatch and are out with their parents,” he says. “The idea isn’t to limit recreational use or restrict where boaters and anglers can go, but to let people know that loons need some seclusion in late spring and early summer. If we can do that, there’s no reason loons and people can’t keep enjoying these lakes together.” 🐾

This year’s Loon Day is July 16. To participate, contact Chris Hammond at (406) 751-4582 or chammond@mt.gov or visit the Montana Loon Society’s (MLS) website, montanaloons.org. Find information on Montana loons—including advice for lakeshore owners on loon-friendly land practices—at the MLS website. Read the most recent Montana loon conservation plan on the FWP website at fwp.mt.gov/wildthings/management/commonLoon/.