

Questions and Answers About Loons in Vermont

Vermont Loon Recovery Project (VLRP)

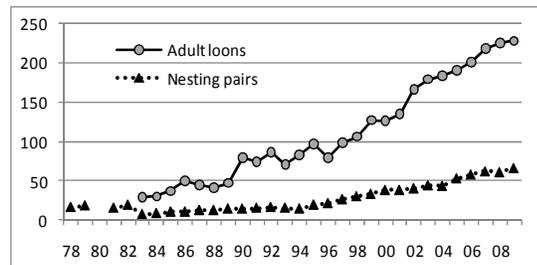


Funded by donations, a State Wildlife Grant, and other small grants. Please support Nongame Wildlife by purchasing the Conservation License Plate.

The VLRP is a program of the Vermont Center for Ecostudies and the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department.

Why do loons need our help to maintain their population?

- **Loon habitat and where people recreate almost entirely overlap.** Loons nest 1-2 feet from shore, not 30 feet back in the marsh. They will leave the nest if people get too close. Loons rear their young and feed in the open water making them prone to disturbance and even boat hits.
- **In the early to mid 1980s, there were less than 10 nesting pairs annually in Vermont.** The population has recovered enough to remove them from the state endangered species list in 2005, but the threats that contributed to their decline persist e.g., flooding of nests on lakes with dams, human disturbance to nest sites, loss of nesting habitat, lead poisoning from fishing gear, entanglement in fishing line, swallowing of bait and lures, and mercury contamination.



How can I help loons nest successfully?

Heed floating signs near nest areas

- ▽ You're too close if you see the loon lower its head, trying to hide, or if a loon acts nervous or distressed (bill dipping, splashing, calling).
- ▽ Loons may abandon their nest if repeatedly disturbed, causing nest failure.



How can I help loons and loon chicks survive the summer?

SLOW DOWN whenever you see loons.

- * Loon chicks are difficult to see and cannot dive well.
- * Wakes from boats can flood shoreline nests and overwhelm young chicks.
- * If boating fast (e.g., waterskiing) or using a personal watercraft, avoid boating in the area where the loons are.

WATCH LOONS FROM A DISTANCE.

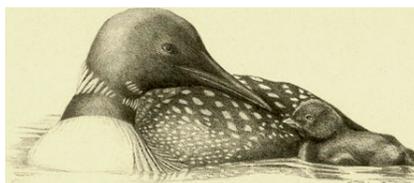
- * Approaching a loon family prevents them from feeding the chicks and stresses the birds.

ANGLERS: Reel in when loons are diving nearby.

- * Loons will take live bait and lures.
- * Over 700 hours were spent trying to rescue loons caught in fishing line from 2004-9. Some were saved; many died.

How can I help secure the loons' future?

- Report loon sightings on lakes and ponds with nesting potential (see list).
- Become a volunteer. Contact the VLRP.
- Lakeshore owners: 1) consider ways to protect loon nesting sites far into the future, and 2) maintain lake water quality and healthy riparian zones by not using fertilizers, planting shoreline buffer zones, and keeping your lakeshore "wild."
- **Support the VLRP through a donation.**



Evelyn Richer

(as of 2009) Lakes with nesting potential

Carmi	Miller
Caspian	Moore
Center	Morey
Champlain	Neal
Crystal	Nelson
Curtis	Noyes
Dog (Valley)	Parker
Elmore	Pigeon
Fairfield	Rescue
Fairlee	Salem
Gale Meadows	Shadow (Glov.)
Grt Averill—inlet	Stratton
Greenwood	Wallace
Groton -North	Wapanacki
Lyford	Warden
Marshfield	Waterbury
Memphremagog	Wheeler
Metcalf	Willoughby

What types of loon sightings to report to the VLRP?

- **Repeated sightings of loon pairs...**indicates potential development of territorial pair. Things to consider: Does the lake need more monitoring? Where will the pair likely nest? Do camp owners or hydroelectric company need to be contacted? Would nest warning signs be needed?
- **Loon sitting on shore...**possible nest site or injured or sick loon. Is signage needed around the nest site?
- **LOON CHICKS...**many new nests are not discovered until loon chicks are observed.

To report sightings, to volunteer, or make a donation, contact:

For more information: www.vtecostudies.org

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How do I know if I am disturbing the loons?

- 1) If a loon “crouches” or “hides” with head extended low...
- 2) If you separate the adults from the chick(s)...
- 3) When loons begin laughing (the tremolo—alarm / alert call) or yodeling (the male territorial call)...
- 4) When they dip or raise their bills, and act agitated...
- 5) When they splash water, often while doing their calls (penguin dance)...

** If you see people disturbing loons on the water or at a nest, please ask them to back away **

penguin dance wing rowing



Hiding on nest

hiding on water

Distressed Postures

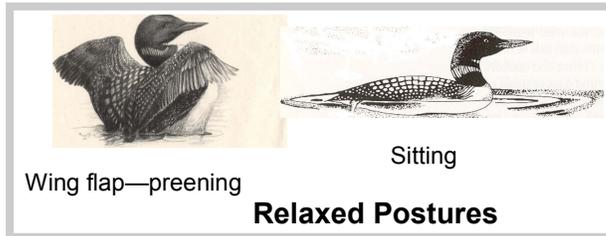
Images from J. McIntyre. 1988. “Common Loon: Spirit of Northern Lakes.”

Getting a close look

Loons can be curious, but use binoculars or let them swim toward you. Adults with chicks and on nests are much more sensitive than adults by themselves.

Never pursue loons by boat. Move quietly if they get close.

Respect...



Relaxed Postures

What do all those different calls mean?

- **The mournful “wail”...ooohh ahhhh.....**
Mates calling one another or birds identifying each other; a more friendly call.
- **The laughing “tremolo”...a trill of series of trills (cackling laugh)...** A sign of distress or alarm caused by a person, a nearby predator, an unknown sound, or an unwelcome loon.
- **The crazy and wild “yodel”.....**
Watch out; the male territorial call. This call is usually directed at unwelcome loons.

Fishing and Loons

- Lead poisoning from the ingestion of lead sinkers and jigs has been documented in 27 species of waterbirds.
- Over 50 percent of all dead adult loons in New England analyzed by Tufts University (1985-2006) have died from lead fishing gear or ingestion of lures/hooks and entanglement in fishing line (180 of 360 in New England and 27 of 44 in Vermont).
- Please purchase and use non-lead sinkers and jigs. It's the law for sinkers 1/2 ounce or less.
- Pick-up discarded fishing line.
- **REEL IN WHEN LOONS ARE DIVING NEARBY—**
Loons take live bait and lures.
- Thank you for your help.

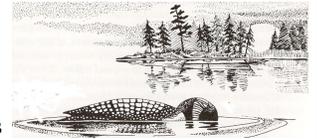


Help stop mercury from getting into our lakes and wildlife.

- ▽ Mercury comes from coal-burning power plants, fluorescent lights, small batteries, and many things we burn. Loons with high mercury produce fewer chicks. High mercury adult loons sit on the nest only 86% of the time compared to 99% for “normal” loons.

Loons and people can co-exist, with a little help

Loons through the Seasons



April: Loons return to our lakes and ponds to set up territories.

For lakes less than 200 acres, only one pair will reside on the lake, but intruder loons may visit to assess the possibility of a takeover. 20% of loons switch mates in a given year. For larger lakes, there can be multiple territories, often located in distinct bays.

May-June: Loons build their nests right on the shoreline near open water. Loons cannot walk or stand on land; their feet are too far back on their body. Most nests are on islands or marsh edges where there are fewer predators. The male and female each spend 4-5 hours tending the nest before switching places. Male and female adults share equally in nest and chick rearing duties. Loons will lay 1 or 2 eggs. Loons, on average, do not nest until they are 7 years old.

June-August: Eggs will hatch after about 27 days of incubation. The chicks are able to swim almost immediately. The family will move to a “nursery area” where there is less wind and wave action and good feeding for small fish. Chicks ride on their parents back for rest and protection.

Parent loons are highly protective during this time. Chicks might be stashed near shore during visits by intruder loons. Non-breeding loons or floaters often visit loon pairs to assess the chances for a takeover.

September-November: The chicks become much more independent during this period, feeding by themselves, and learning to fly. The adults often leave the chicks in October. They might raft up with other adults on larger lakes before migrating to the ocean. Adults start molting into their gray and white plumage (and look like a big loon chick). The chicks usually stay until November and even December.

November-April: New England loons spend the winter off the New England coast feeding and undergoing a complete molt (replace flight feathers). Loons observed off the southern U.S. coast, likely come from the upper Midwest. 1-2 year old loons, called immatures or sub-adults, usually remain on the ocean during the summer. Loons that remain on freshwater in the winter are taking a risk of the lake freezing over.