

6/28?
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Natural History Notes



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"The Spirit of Northern Waters" - II

To the Cree Indians, who called the loon "the spirit of northern waters," it symbolized just that. To us, the loon symbolizes the wild north country with its remoteness and its solitude, a pristine wilderness. The common loon's nesting range extends from northern Illinois to Labrador and across the entire northern United States. However, the numbers of Common Loons on our lakes have greatly decreased since 1900 as the species becomes increasingly rare in its southern range.

The activities of man are largely responsible for the loon's decline. In the early 1900's shooting loons was considered a great sport. They were particularly vulnerable during migration when they were present in large numbers. In flight the loon is particularly difficult to shoot down. Pond shooting these birds was also considered a great challenge to many. When shot at, upon seeing the flash, the loon could often dive before the bullet could reach it. However, after several shots — if the bird wasn't killed — it often died of exhaustion or fear. The Migratory Bird Act, passed during World War I, banned the sport shooting of nongame birds including loons. The commercial fisherman's gillnet remains one of the loon's serious threats. Hundreds of loons are killed each year by becoming entangled in gill nets and drowning.

There are four species of loons: the Yellow-billed, the Arctic, the Red-throated, and the Common Loon, but only the Common Loon inhabits our area. As the ice breaks up in our lakes in spring the loon moves northward to its breeding grounds. Knowledge of the biology of loons is scant, but it is believed they mate for life and that a mated pair will nest on the same lake throughout their lives. Compared to other species of birds the loon produces few offspring. Loons don't mate until they are three or four years old. Mating is preceded by a series of highly ritualized courtship displays such as diving, splashing, bowing and calling. Then two large olive-brown eggs are laid in a secluded spot very close to the water's edge. No nest is built, but a marshy or cattail point, or even a muskrat house, is selected as a nesting site. The loon prefers to nest near deep water so it can quickly escape predators since the bird can't walk on land but is an expert swimmer and diver. The incubation period is 29 days and both the male and female take turns setting on the eggs; each turn lasts about three or four hours.



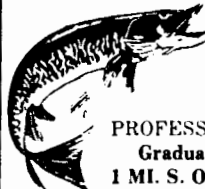
Loons in flight are hunchbacked and gangly, with a slight downward sweep to the neck and the feet projecting behind.



THE COMMON LOON

The incubation period is very critical for the loon who is a very wary and sensitive bird. Human disturbances directed at a loon nest will often cause the pair to abandon the nest. If you know of a loon nest and you want to help this declining species, the best thing to do is stay away. Loon eggs are also often eaten by predators such as raccoon, mink, ravens, gulls, and many other animals frequenting the water's edge. Unlike many birds, the loon doesn't re-nest if disturbed or the eggs lost. Excessive shoreline development is also responsible for the loon's decline. When a cabin or dock goes up near a loon nesting area they will simply cease nesting but remain on the same lake, summer after summer, with no young being produced. No one is likely to notice that the pair of loons has stopped nesting until one day, maybe 15 years later, the loons are gone from the lake forever.

Loons live to be about 25 years old. They feed mainly on fish, but also eat frogs, crayfish, and other aquatic animals. Many fishermen feel the loon is in competition with them when actually the reverse is true. The loon feeds on smaller fish and usually catches the slower moving nongame species, helping to keep the fish population in balance and thus more productive. The key to protecting this unique symbol of our north country is education. If you know the whereabouts of a pair of loons, avoid disturbing them and caution others. When the loons leave your vacation spot or lake for the last time, it will be a great loss indeed.



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