

6/14/80

Natural History Notes

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"The Spirit of Northern Waters" - I

Mookwa is a Cree Indian word meaning "spirit of northern waters." This is what the Crees call one of our most admirable birds, the loon. Those individuals lucky enough to have seen or heard this unusual bird never forget it. The loon's eerie wail is a sound that is synonymous with the wild north country. The loon has another call which is a scary, laughing, yodel-like cry that sends a chill down the spine of those within hearing. This call is probably responsible for the name loon, which means "Crazy fellow" in Scottish.

However, the cry of the loon is far from being its only unusual characteristic. This bird has been around for more than 110 million years and on the evolutionary scale is closer to its reptile ancestors than most living species of birds. The loon lacks the elaborate air-sac system found in most birds. This air-sac system serves two purposes. One is to make the bird lighter and therefore a more efficient flier. Secondly, the air-sacs serve as a cooling system to dissipate metabolic heat. The loon lacks this system but has a very high metabolic rate, a puzzling phenomena. It also has very heavy bones compared to other birds whose bones contain many cavities. This heavy bone structure, as well as the lack of an air-sac system, make the loon an inefficient flier, but become an advantage that enables the loon to dive more than 200 feet below the water's surface.

The loon is strictly an aquatic bird. It can't walk on land and the only time it spends on land is during the nesting period. Its unusual leg structure makes it almost helpless out of the water where it must push itself along on its belly, similar to a seal. Because its legs are set so far back on its body the loon can't even stand upright on land, for its center of gravity is so far forward. Nor can the loon take to flight from land. During take-off the loon has to run on the water's surface as it flaps its wings to gain the momentum it needs to fly.



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



THE COMMON LOON

The leg structure is also unusual when compared to other birds. Besides being set far back on the body, its legs are very short. The thigh bone is held within the body. The lower leg bone is exposed and the joint comparable to the ankle appears to be the loon's knee which bends "backwards." This rather bizarre arrangement, the "backward" bending knee, is a very typical loon feature. The toes are connected to this "backwards" knee and are webbed like ducks' feet. Although rather helpless on land, these adaptations make the loon far superior to most birds when it comes to swimming and diving.

The loon has a narrow wing and a low body weight to wing surface ratio, thus it must run on the water's surface as it vigorously flaps its wings to gain enough lift for flight. But once in the air the loon is a swift and powerful flier. The loon is a very alert and nervous bird when human intruders are near. Its reflexes are almost instantaneous. When shot at while sitting on the water, it is said that upon seeing the flash the loon could dive before the bullet reached it. Sport shooting of loons was once very popular, but due to regulation it is a sport of the past - hopefully forever.

This unusual bird is declining rapidly if not already gone from most areas in the United States. It is the responsibility of everyone of us to protect and preserve this unique bird which is the symbol of our wild north country.

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