



Your Loon Questions Answered

Maine Lake's Wednesday Webinar – April 29, 2020

Questions and Answers Recap – Tracy Hart, James Paruk & Mark Pokras

Are Loons protected throughout their range? Are they legally hunted?

While historically hunted in the 1800s for both game and sport, Common Loons in the US and Canada are protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, but First Nations peoples are permitted to take some in Canada.

Is there as much attention given to other waterfowl, such as cormorants or mallards, or is the attention given to loons unique. And if so, why do you think that is the case?

No, other wildlife species lurk in the shadows of the loons' unique popularity. That popularity is due, we think, because of the loon's large size, their charismatic black and white coloring and their unique, haunting calls. The good thing is that work to conserve loon habitat (undisturbed shoreline, clean water, healthy fish populations) benefit lots of other lake wildlife.

From loon counts, have we learned about survival of chicks per loon family. Do we see 2 or even 3 chicks survive until loon count or is it nearly always only one?

Many organizations throughout the loons' range have studied chick survival. Average chick survival (over the course of a breeding season) is thought to be 0.5 (so one chick surviving every other year per pair). Loons typically don't lay more than two eggs, so it is exceedingly rare to see a brood of three chicks.

How has the Lead Law impacted the loons and how has it impacted the rate of deaths of Loons per year?

It appears that the numbers are going down, although it is probably too soon to tell if the laws will be effective. Lead poisoning continues to be a main cause of death for common loon adults in Maine.

What is the present situation with loons and lead poisoning now?

We are continuing to necropsy loon cadavers that are recovered in Maine to monitor causes of death. The Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife is currently leading that effort.

Now that lead poisoning is in check, is it true that the #1 cause of death for loons is loon-on-loon fighting, particularly from loon impalement from underwater into the chest of its adversary. True?

It appears that boat strikes and lead poisoning still cause more deaths than territorial disputes, although we do see evidence of that during necropsy - males and females both!

What can you tell me about the diet of the loons on a lake where there is an abundance of alewife?

Most of the data about loon diets we get from studying what's in the gizzard of dead loons that have been turned in for necropsy. In general, loons will eat whatever is most abundant in their lake. It's logical that alewives would be a very good food source for loons, especially in Maine where their ranges have historically overlapped.

What impact did the BP oil spill off the coast of Louisiana have on loons?

The level of oiling rates observed in loons suggests some population level impact, but it is unknown where many of these loons breed and loon censusing across Canada and upper Midwest did not reflect any significant decline in population.

Has any research been done in the real Northern Maine - Aroostook County?

There is some localized research efforts on Common Loons in Maine, but none that we know of in Aroostook County. Biodiversity Research Institute has a long-term study of loon productivity in the Rangeley area. Lee Attix of Loon Conservation Associates has done several local projects monitoring loon nesting success in the Belgrade Lakes and some other areas around the southern half of the state.

Could you please give us the phone numbers to call when a loon needs help?

Call the nearest dispatch center to reach a warden (Augusta 1-800-452-4664, Bangor 1-800-432-7381, or Houlton 1-800-924-2261). You can also reach out to Maine Lakes at 495-2301 or Maine Audubon at 781-2330.

Do loons return to the same lakes every year?

Loons have high site fidelity in that they typically return near to where they hatched and then return typically to the same areas to nest from year to year.

Thanks for all your work! We live on an 81-acre pond in Maine where two chicks born to the pair of loons in 2018. In 2019 and 2020, we have had four loons on the pond, all socializing together. Two of the loons look smaller than others. Is it likely that the chicks from 2018 came back to their native pond each summer? Have you seen this kind of community behavior before?

Though hard to prove if the birds aren't color-banded, the speculation from researchers is that young probably do come back to visit their parents in the years before they start nesting. Otherwise, loons are very territorial and chase most other adults out of their territory.

Could the growth in the eagle population affect the number of loon chicks?

Sure. Eagles are a top predator and loon chicks can be an easy prey item. However, Common Loons and Bald Eagles have coexisted across the same North American range for many thousands of years, and we believe Common Loon adults are able to protect their chicks from eagle predation by being vigilant and observant when eagles are around. Eagles and loons will continue to coexist for many more centuries to come!

We have lots and lots of eagles. I have not seen a lot of chicks, although we have plenty of loons, as well. How much do eagles prey on loon chicks?

If they do, which I expect, it appears there is nothing we can do about it! See answer above, as far as we know, no one has collected data on the percentage of loon chick mortality due to eagles.

Do you think there will be differences with the loons' behaviors and population with the possibility of less camps being open and boats/people on the lake this summer?

Great question. Loons do seem to get used to people, and on busy lakes loons may not be disturbed by much activity. There is anecdotal observation data from remote lakes that seems to point to those loons being much more sensitive to even minor human disturbances. Certainly less boat traffic this summer could help loons thrive (less wake, less direct disturbance of feeding families, lower chance of boat collisions), though the lack of people at camps may open the door for more predators like mink, skunk, and racoons getting to lakeside nest sites.

Does anyone have experience working with local fire departments in rescuing loons trapped on iced-in lakes? We lost 3 loons to eagles last fall during an early ice-in. Fire departments have the equipment, wardens have the expertise. Can we get them together to rescue loons in the fall?

Winter loon rescues are more common in other states such as NY and WI. It is dangerous and takes special equipment and training. As of right now, this is not being done in Maine, but several groups are discussing this for the future.

When do loons get banded?

Loons are typically captured at night using a spotlight to immobilize them on the water and a long-handled net to bring them safely to the shore or boat. Biologists must have permits for this work. Banding has been on-going in Maine in specific locations where there are long-term studies (Rangeley).

How many pairs of loons were counted last year and how many chicks?

The loon count tallies the number of adults and chicks seen on the third Saturday in July, and uses a sample of those observations to calculate the number of adults and chicks in the southern half of the state. For last years results, check here: <https://www.maineaudubon.org/news/results-of-the-2019-loon-count/>

What can you teach us about rogue loons as we saw several on West Cove Summer 2018.

“Rogue” loons can come into a territory and disrupt a pair. While often these rogues are males, they can also be females. They will challenge the nesting mates, and can sometimes have dramatic battle resulting in injury or even death. If the rogue loon takes over, they may injure or kill existing chicks on the territory and try to start a new nest with the mate that has been left behind.

How deep and how long can a Common Loon dive?

Probably as much as 200 feet, though as visual predators they probably wouldn't be able to see or find much at those depths. Typical dives last less than a minute, though under stress, it's believed they can stay under for up to three minutes.

What percentage of Maine loons simply stay off the Maine coast during the winter?

I don't believe anyone has a good handle on that number. There have been some studies of wintering loons back in the late 1970s but there are no good census numbers for the winter loon population.

I've read that Maine loons are somewhat larger than the mid-west loons because they migrate shorter distances and therefore are “fatter” ... is that true?

Yes, there is a gradient of loons getting heavier from west to east across the country. One theory is that because they have a shorter distance to migrate, they can afford to be heavier and use more energy to fly. However, that doesn't explain why loons in the Pacific Northwest would not also be heavier, as many of them have equally short migration routes.

In the fall, when the loons gather together on the lake before migrating, it appears that they “hunt” as a pack, they will dive in large numbers together (I’ve seen up to 24). I’m assuming they are chasing a school of fish as a pack. Is this true?

Yes, loons are cooperative hunters, both in the fall when they are in social "rafts" and also out on salt water in the winter when they also gather in groups.

We have loons here on saltwater all winter? Is that usual and do both male and female stay together year round?

Pairs do not overwinter together, it appears females winter further south than males. Roughly 90-95% of the world's common loons winter in oceans, so it is not uncommon to see them in this environment.

Does their environment change their behavior?

Yes. You can see from several answers from above that loons will behave differently depending on disturbance/stress, food availability, territorial disputes with other loons, predator presence, etc.

We know loons live on both fresh and salt water but do loons drink salt water or need a fresh water source?

Loons likely do not drink saltwater. They do have a salt gland above the eye that becomes activated when they interact with marine environments, to get rid of excess salt in their new diet.

Has there been a documented case of 4 or more nesting attempts by a pair of Common Loons?

Not that we know of in Maine.

What is the typical ‘resting’ time as loons migrate through SW Michigan? I’ve noticed that a pair stays here approx. 2 or 3 days.

Probably varies by year (e.g., early vs late spring), shorter by a day or so if late spring, or extended a day or two if spring arrives early. You could check with the Michigan loon group for more info:
michiganloons.org; michiganloons@gmail.com