

# Getting in tune with the Common Loon



*Few birds symbolize the Canadian summer more than the elegant loon.  
And few are more misunderstood, says loon watcher Charlie Walcott*

The more he studies loons, the more Charlie Walcott digs up surprises about birds we all thought we knew: The pair that mates for life and returns each summer? Nope. Loons can change mates in a heartbeat. Peaceful birds in calm water? No again. They can fight all day; even stab each other to death.

We tracked Walcott down in his Cornell University office and asked him about the official bird of cottage country.

“I guess what I find most astonishing (is) loons have been studied for years. Everybody knows about loons,” he said. “Except that when you start to identify individuals, we keep discovering new and interesting things. An animal we know so much about — there’s still so much to learn.”

## **Q. What are all those calls about?**

There are four:

- **Hoot:** A soft, single note to stay in touch with family.
- **Tremolo:** A fast-vibrating call when the loon is worried. This is the one that sounds like laughter. If it's really upset it may also flap its wings and rise up in the water, the "penguin dance."
- **Yodel:** Two low notes to start, then a series of high calls that swoop up and down. Warning to a rival.
- **Wail:** Long, slow, haunting call loved by tourists. One loon telling others: Here I am.

## **Q: How does the yodel work?**

"The male gives the yodel, and that basically says: 'If you're another male loon and you come here, I will try to dive underneath you and spear you through the sternum with my bill.' It's not a welcoming call."

It doesn't make this call all the time, like a robin staking out territory. "The loon only responds if an intruder flies over. Or a float plane, it turns out."

"Basically it happens only if there's a provocation during the day."

## **Q: Why are loons so noisy at night?**

Night time calls are a mystery. "My guess is that at night it's quiet and these sounds travel a long distance, and it's a way of figuring out who's on adjacent lakes, what they sound like, and so on." Loons, like guys in a bar, may want to size up the opposition before starting a fight.

## **Q: Do loons never sleep?**

"Well, they do. But they kind of keep one eye open and they paddle out in the middle of the lake. I can attest to this because ... I have been on many occasions sitting there (in a boat) with one loon on the nest and the other sound asleep in the middle of the lake. You have to sit there for an hour watching a sleeping loon. It's not too exciting."

## **Q: Why do you band loons?**

"It enables us to identify the individual loon."

He sometimes wishes he could study land birds. "They sit on a branch and you can see the wretched bands."

The loon's bands are underwater. But thanks to the bird's odd leg design they remain fairly visible from a canoe.

Loon legs are at the back end of the bird, like a boat propeller. "Then about once an hour they preen, and ... they roll over and wave their legs in the air, and you've got them."

They put two coloured bands on each leg. So for example one loon can be mint over white on the left leg, blue over red stripe on the right leg. A scientist can read those as easily as hockey fans can pick out a uniform colour.

### **Q: Is banding a loon fun?**

No! You go out at night, play recordings of chicks in distress to keep the adults from diving and escaping, shine a light that blinds them, and grab one in a net designed for landing fish.

"They are big and kind of scary. They've got lots of sharp corners. That beak is pretty impressive. It bites and it spears.

"Their toes are equipped with great claws and their wings are very powerful. And you have an 'irate customer' in the net."

The trick is to slip a towel over its head in a hurry. This instantly makes the loon docile.

### **Q: How serious are their fights?**

"Among males, 30 per cent of the battles are fatal, but for any given loon that may not happen for five or 10 years. I've been working on loons now for 10 or 15 years. I've seen precisely two fights. Most of the time it's an aggressive chase and that's it." One loon chases off a rival and take its spot in the family.

### **Q: So they don't mate for life?**

No. "This legend has grown (because) until you band, all loons look more or less alike."

Sometimes a yodel will prevent a fight. One experiment used playback of loon calls. "If you play a yodel to a loon flying over a lake, it reduces the landing by about 50 per cent. It says to a loon: I'm a male and I'm down here."

### **Q: Why is this tough bird so shy of humans?**

Sometimes it isn't. "A number of fishermen have complained to me that the G.D. loons are so much trouble. They get a fish on the line and the loon will grab the fish because it's a lot easier to catch."

But it depends on the lake. On Wisconsin lakes with a lot of boats, the birds are accustomed to humans and tolerate them a few metres away. But when Walcott visits a remote lake in Maine “I can’t get within 100 yards of them.”

### **Q: How can they stay underwater so long?**

Walcott thinks they stay down as long as 15 minutes, and they come up ready to dive again after a couple of breaths.

“They have a very efficient respiratory system.

“In our system, you breathe in, the air goes into a dead-end sac, and then you breathe out.” It’s like a car where the air intake doubles as the exhaust pipe. Most of the oxygen isn’t absorbed. “Birds have a bunch of air sacs and a one-way flow of air through the lungs. The blood flows in the opposite direction to the air.”

The loon extracts about 90 per cent of the oxygen in air.

### **Q: Why do loons have red eyes?**

Unknown, but one guess is that it helps them see underwater.

“It certainly is highly characteristic, and loons have extremely good vision both underwater and on top of the water. That’s quite a trick” because the optics in water are completely different.

### **Q: Do they fly well?**

Not very well. Especially, they don’t take off well.

Loons are built to dive and catch fish, with heavy bones and dense muscles. “In order to become airborne they need these long lakes, and they can’t take off from land.”

An oddity: The loons in New England, which migrate a short distance to the Atlantic, are a kilogram heavier than loons from Wisconsin and Northern Ontario which fly to Florida.



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