

The Common Loon

Most of us would consider the loon as beautiful and special, symbolising wilderness and solitude. Many cottagers, campers and vacationers would feel their trip was incomplete without viewing a loon or listening to its haunting call.

The “Common Loon” is the species known to us. They migrate to the warmer areas around the Gulf of Mexico and on the eastern coasts of North America to winter, returning to our region when the ice melts in the spring.



In the summer months, the loon is a striking bird with its black-and-white chequered back, glossy black head, white belly and wing lining, and characteristic white necklace around the throat. Loons swim low in the water and their skeleton and muscular systems are designed for swimming and diving. They are streamlined with their legs placed far back on their body, allowing for excellent movement in the water but somewhat awkward on land. Many bones of the loon’s body are solid, rather than hollow like other birds, which aids in their diving ability. The loon can stay underwater for almost a minute and can dive to depths of 80 metres. During the dive, the feathers are compressed and air is forced from between the feathers and from the air sacs in the body.

The life expectancy of the loon may be 15 to 30 years. They arrive in pairs and are solitary nesters, mating for life. Loons build their nest close to the water, with the best sites being completely surrounded by water, such as an island or half-submerged log. It is important not to disturb nesting loons or their eggs.

Loons are primarily fish eaters and will catch whatever species they can. Game fish, such as trout, are difficult for a loon to catch. A trout swims in a straight line and is capable of quick bursts of speed, allowing it to stay ahead of the loon. As well, the trout often heads for deeper water where visibility is poor and the loon loses sight of it. Loons are more successful at catching slower fish that zigzag to escape. They also feed on crayfish, aquatic insects, vegetation and leeches.

Loon chicks generally appear towards the end of June. They can swim right away but spend some time on their parents’ backs to rest, conserve heat and avoid predators. The chicks do not return to the nest. Remember to admire loons from afar; do not chase them nor follow them too closely.

Despite the fact that loons live most of their lives on the water, they can also drown. A few years ago, in Campbell’s Bay, a teenager with a 10 hp motor managed such a feat. He cornered a loon and terrorised it by circling around and around, forming a vortex that the loon could not escape. Some neighbours seeing this managed to warn this kid away but it was too late. By next morning, the loon was found drowned. Too tired from its exertions in trying to escape, it ran out of energy to save itself.

Arguably, the most fascinating thing about the “Common Loon” is their haunting and variable voice. They are most vocal from mid-May to mid-June. They have four distinct calls which they use in varying combinations to communicate with their families and other loons.

The loon is protected by federal law and may not be hunted. Recent studies have indicated that loon nesting success and survival of the young may decrease with increased lake acidity due to acid rain. Direct human disturbances can affect loons in many ways as well. Loons have adapted quite successfully to some level of disturbance by people on our lakes. Visitors to lakes with loons can help them by only observing adults and chicks from a distance and by not disturbing nests. People should never chase loons and should be careful with fishing tackle – abandoned or unattended fishing lines may entangle and injure loons. Boats should be used cautiously around loons, avoiding wash near the lake edge.

If you are interested in learning more about loons or wish to become involved in loon conservation, contact The Canadian Lakes Loon Survey at 1-888-448-2473 ext. 124, or visit their website: www.birdscanada.org/volunteer/clls/.