

## Loons speak in different dialects



*Few birds symbolize the Canadian summer more than the elegant loon.*

The loons of Eastern North America have distinct “dialects” from one region to another, says a veteran bird scientist from Cornell University.

Charlie Walcott has spent more than a decade studying loons on the many small lakes of Wisconsin, and says each region has a unique version of the loon call known as the yodel.

Loons have many different calls, ranging from soft hoots to the long, haunting “wail.” But the yodel stands out because that’s how a male loon tells intruders to stay away.

All the loons in a set of neighbouring lakes will have one style, which he calls “a dialect.”

“A loon coming in to one of those groups of lakes adopts a yodel which is different than all the neighbours, but not too different, he said.

Walcott said it’s like different people singing the national anthem at baseball games – the same basic notes, but with variations. “It’s slight differences in pitch; it’s slight differences in timing.

“Why that’s important we don’t really understand. What I think it has to do with is communication from lake to lake, and I think the loons must be learning something from listening to the yodels of other loons,” he said.

The yodel is a high, piercing cry. It starts with a couple of low notes, and then becomes high-pitched, with a series of up-and-down screeches.

The yodel is more than a warning, he says. It also transmits information.

Bigger loons have deeper voices. As well, the longer one draws out its yodel tells how aggressive a loon is.

“The longer the yodel, the more aggressive the loon seems to be.”

He says the discovery of dialect “is intriguing, but what it all means I don’t know.”

Walcott’s earlier work on loons exposed their violent side. If a yodel doesn’t warn away an intruder, males sometimes fight to the death, which usually happens when one loon manoeuvres under the other and spears it through the heart with its powerful beak. Female loons also fight over territory but are unlikely to kill.

If an intruder wins, it takes over the family of the loon that it killed or drove away, swimming around peacefully with its new mate as if nothing had happened.

Walcott is in Cornell’s department of neurobiology and behaviour.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology has recordings of yodels and other loon calls at [www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/common\\_loon/sounds](http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/common_loon/sounds).



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