

Silence of the Loons

By Jenny Costelo

Every Nova Scotian would probably agree that a visit to a remote lake during the summer would not be complete without hearing the haunting call of the common loon. Perhaps this primitive bird, more than any other avian species, puts the “wild” in wilderness.

Unfortunately, during the last few years, there has been an increase in the number of dead loons turned in to DNR’s Waverley office, particularly during the summer months. In 2003, five dead loons collected here were shipped to the Canadian Co-operative Wildlife Health Centre (CCWHC) located at the Atlantic Veterinary College in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. The birds were examined as part of an on-going study to document the cause of death in loons across Canada.

The common loon, a large, long-lived bird (up to 25 years), is an excellent swimmer and diver. A loon will often stay submerged for one minute or longer while chasing fish, such as perch, for food. The bird’s legs are placed well back on the body, an adaptation which enhances



swimming ability, but causes the loon to be quite awkward on land. Loons cannot become airborne if grounded, and on occasion, our office has had to rescue loons that missed a water landing.

Loons spend the winter on salt water, with some birds migrating south between mid-September and late November. Adult loons spend the summer on lakes around Nova Scotia, returning to feed in these areas as soon as the ice goes out in the spring. Adults breed each year and studies have shown that they

prefer to breed on large lakes (>5 ha), but if lakes are small, numerous lakes may be utilized by a pair. The nest is built on the ground with decaying vegetation and placed near the water’s edge, often on an island, which may be more secure. Sometimes loons are known to nest on floating mats of vegetation and will occasionally utilize artificial floating nest structures. Generally, two eggs are hatched sometime between June and July, with both parents tending the young. The young birds are usually 10 to 11



weeks of age before they leave their birth lake.

Urban expansion and increased cottage growth have moved people into freshwater habitats that traditionally were inhabited by loons. The resulting recreational activity by people who fish and/or drive motorized water craft have contributed to loon mortality. Lead sinker and jig ingestion by loons causes the birds to die of lead poisoning. The loons either mistake the fishing gear for food or grit, or they eat lost bait with the line and lead weight still attached. Either way, ingesting a single lead sinker exposes a loon to a lethal dose of lead.

Studies show that lead toxicity is one of the leading causes of death in adult loons in eastern Canada. Dr. Pierre-Yves Daoust, a veterinary pathologist with the CCWHC, reports that 104 common loons (83 adults, 21 immature) from the Atlantic provinces were examined by that agency between 1992 and 2003. Lead poisoning from ingesting fishing gear was the prime factor in 28 per cent of the deaths in the

adult loons (23 birds). Other causes of death included entanglement in commercial fishing gear, trauma, starvation and disease.

Of the five loons we sent to the CCWHC from the Waverley office in 2003, two died of lead poisoning, one died of trauma (probably impact with a boat when surfacing from a

dive), one died of starvation, and the final one was too decomposed to determine a cause of death. In 2004 three dead loons were sent to the CCWHC from NS. One died of lead poisoning and the other two of complications from starvation.

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You Can Help Loons

- At the lake, give loons the space and quiet they need to forage, feed and raise their young.
- Avoid beach activity in areas where loons nest.
- Switch to tin or steel sinkers and jigs.
- When driving motorized water craft, give loons a wide berth.
- Report dead loons to the local DNR office so fresh specimens can be submitted for testing.

If loons are known to successfully nest on a particular lake, post "Loon Alert" signs (available from DNR offices) to help educate lake users to the dangers that face loons.

Everyone would agree that listening to the loon's plaintive call as a full moon rises over a misty lake is much preferable to hearing a "silence of the loons".