

# Loons On Our Lakes

Large and conspicuous with unmistakable calls, the Common Loon is a familiar inhabitant of our lakes. It is also a well-known indicator of healthy aquatic ecosystems because it sits at the top of the food chain, where it sometimes receives high concentrations of pollutants from the fish and other creatures that it eats. Where pollution is a problem, loons generally raise fewer chicks as a result.



J.M. Ryder

## About Loons

The Common Loon is the only loon species that nests on interior lakes in southern B.C. In the water it is extremely fast and agile, but on land it can only shuffle along on its belly for very short distances because its legs are so far back on its body. The Common Loon feeds opportunistically on a variety of fish, often taking advantage of the temporary abundance of a particular species. When given the choice, it prefers to feed on species in the Sunfish family (rather than species in the Salmon family such as trout). Despite eating mostly fish, it also eats crustaceans, frogs, snails, and aquatic insects. Loons stay underwater for an average of 40 seconds, but can stay down for two or three minutes, and dive to depths of at least 30 m.

Because they are heavy birds with relatively small wings, loons require long "runways" for take-off (200 m or more). Once aloft, they climb slowly, circling if necessary to gain height. At cruising altitude they travel surprisingly quickly.

## Nesting

Loons build nests adjacent to the water's edge. Typically nests are low mounds of vegetation. Nests and eggs are vulnerable to large water level changes and big waves, which can flood the nest and its contents.

## Chicks

Just-hatched chicks are black, fluffy, tiny, and appear in southern B.C. in May and June. They can swim and dive right away, although their downy feathers are so full of air that they tend to bob back up after only a few seconds beneath the surface. For the first two weeks or so, they sometimes ride on their parents' backs to keep warm and conserve energy. When about two weeks old, the black plumage is replaced by a downy brown coat, and when about four weeks old, the grey plumage that they will wear until they become adults starts to appear. When they are about 10 or 11 weeks old, they begin to learn to fly.

## Conservation

The Common Loon can be affected by human activities. Lake pollution due to airborne mercury and the harmful components of acid rain can reduce the number of chicks produced over large areas. Even loons in some of the most remote lakes in B.C. are vulnerable to these pollutants when they are carried over long distances. (See more at: [www.birdscanada.org/volunteer/clis/resources/CLLSsummary.pdf](http://www.birdscanada.org/volunteer/clis/resources/CLLSsummary.pdf))

Locally, nesting loons can be adversely affected by:

- ▶ shoreline development, which sometimes destroys nesting sites;
- ▶ changing water levels, with rising water sometimes flooding nests and falling water sometimes leaving nests too far from the shore for access by the parents;
- ▶ waves generated by power boats, which can swamp nests;
- ▶ disturbance by people, which can separate small chicks from their protective parents, leaving the chicks open to predation by ravens and gulls.

## Fishing

Quietly drifting across the lake while casting a line can provide great opportunities for watching loons, and they may come quite close. However, loons sometimes try to catch hooked bait fish, which can end unfavourably for the loons. Please be considerate and take necessary steps to prevent loons from learning that fishing lines can be a source of food, such as refraining from feeding loons and fishing elsewhere when loons show interest in your line. Also, please be sure to dispose of unwanted fishing line carefully, because if it gets left in the lake or along the shore, loons and other wild creatures sometimes become lethally entangled.

## Language

Common Loons normally "wail" when they wish to reunite with other loons. Males "yodel" while defending their territories. The "tremolo" call — which sounds like crazy laughter — is given in response to a threat. If you hear a tremolo, you may be too close.

**Please help us take care of our loons by allowing *them* to decide how closely we can approach. It is especially important that we leave plenty of space around loon nests and around parents with chicks. By watching their body language and listening to their calls, we will not only be entertained and impressed by this magnificent bird, but we will also get to know when we may have approached too closely. Please see the other side of this brochure for more information on loon body language and what it can tell us.**

The Canadian Lakes Loon Survey is a national Citizen Science monitoring program of Bird Studies Canada. Learn more at [birdscanada.org/loons](http://birdscanada.org/loons).



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Permission from *The Loon Preservation Committee* (New Hampshire), to use their excellent illustrations of loon body-language (p.2) is gratefully acknowledged.

## Relaxed loons



A relaxed loon (holding its head up while on the nest) is able to incubate and hatch its eggs successfully.

This loon is calm and able to carry out normal behaviors to care for itself and its family.



**Enjoy watching loons in these positions!**



Flapping their wings is a normal part of preening and bathing for loons.

Loons also flap their wings to send warning signals to an approaching threat.

**Boaters who see this behavior not associated with preening or bathing should back away from the loon.**

## Concerned loons

**Loons may show stress in subtle ways. Be alert for changes in head and neck posture that may tell you a loon is feeling threatened.**



A nervous loon will often raise the feathers on its forehead to give this "squared-off" look.

This loon is aware of a potential threat and is stretching its neck to evaluate the situation.



This loon is watching a possible threat while trying to appear inconspicuous.

**If you see a loon in these positions, please back away and allow the loon to resume its normal behavior.**

## Stressed loons



When loons feel threatened while on the nest, they will put their heads down. This position indicates the loon may flush from the

nest and leave the eggs to overheat, chill, or be taken by a predator.

**If you see a loon on a nest with its head down, please back away!**



If a boat is too close, a loon may call and/or perform a distraction display called a "penguin dance"—rearing

up in the water with its wings either spread out or clasped against its body and rapidly paddling its feet in the water.

**If you see this display, please leave the area!**

**Any vocalization given when you are close to or approaching a loon can indicate distress. Please back away!**