

The Uncommon Loon

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Source: Daniel Poleschook, Jr. & Ginger R. Gumm



Loons can barely walk on land, so they usually nest very close to water in a secluded spot on a lake shore or island.

The common loon may be the most commonly seen of the world's loons, but it is not at all common. Montana's total population averages 62 territorial pairs, 52 "single" adults, and 41 chicks. Only about 20% of these chicks survive the first three years they spend on the ocean before returning to Montana to breed. Most of Montana's loons spend more than half of their life on the ocean, where they are susceptible to oil spills and hungry orcas.

Summer life in Montana can also be tough for a loon. Only 25 to 30% of what seem to be good nest territories are used by loons. Apparently, this is for a variety of reasons. People like to recreate and

live in the same kinds of habitat as loons, but most of Montana's loons don't seem to tolerate human presence very well. Homes, boat launches, and other structures built along lake shorelines have caused the greatest decline in loon habitat. Motor boats, canoes, and float tubes can cause loons to leave their eggs vulnerable to predators or the weather; boat wakes can swamp nests or wash eggs off nests. Discarded fishing line can entangle loons,

and hooks can imbed in beaks or flesh. Loons eat small gravel to help them grind their food, but a small lead fishing sinker can kill a loon. Water level fluctuations can flood nests or leave eggs and chicks high and dry.

Much loon nest habitat is gone forever, but by working together loons and people can co-exist. Some folks who live close to loon nests keep a watchful eye on the loons and refrain (voluntarily) from using their dock for a few weeks, and keep their dogs inside. Most boaters understand that a loon acting "loony" nearby means that it needs space for a nest or chick. Fishermen

who refrain from fishing near loons, avoid using lead tackle, and clean up old fishing line help prevent loon deaths.

Along with the Montana Loon Society, the Montana Common Loon Working Group (CLWG) coordinates annual common loon monitoring and management activities and secures funding for research, management, and education. We recently completed a management plan for Montana's loons that is loaded with useful tools for loon conservation. Our efforts include years of annual "Loon Day" counts (3rd Saturday in July). About 150 of Montana's loons now have various combinations of color leg bands that help researchers answer many important questions. Considerable effort is taken every year to install and monitor floating nest-area signs, and to remove them as soon as no longer needed. We also install and maintain nesting platforms to accommodate water level fluctuations. Loon Educational Trunks are available for loan to schools, home-schoolers, and community groups. One of our most exciting programs is that of the "Loon Rangers," mostly college interns, who get much of the work done and who act as ambassadors for loons at boat launches and elsewhere throughout the valley.

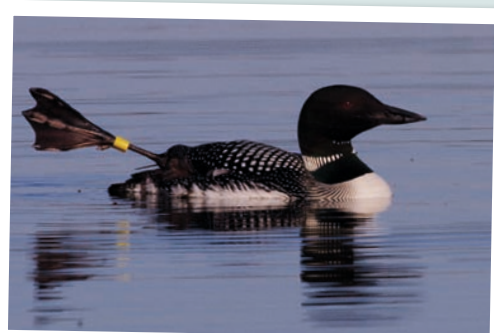
Visit http://fieldguide.mt.gov/detail_ABNBA01030.aspx

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The "penguin dance" tells us this loon is upset! It could be angry at an intruding loon, or maybe your boat is too close to its nest.

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If you get a good look at a loon's bands, record the colors on each leg and which colors are closest to the loon's body. Send this info to Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks.