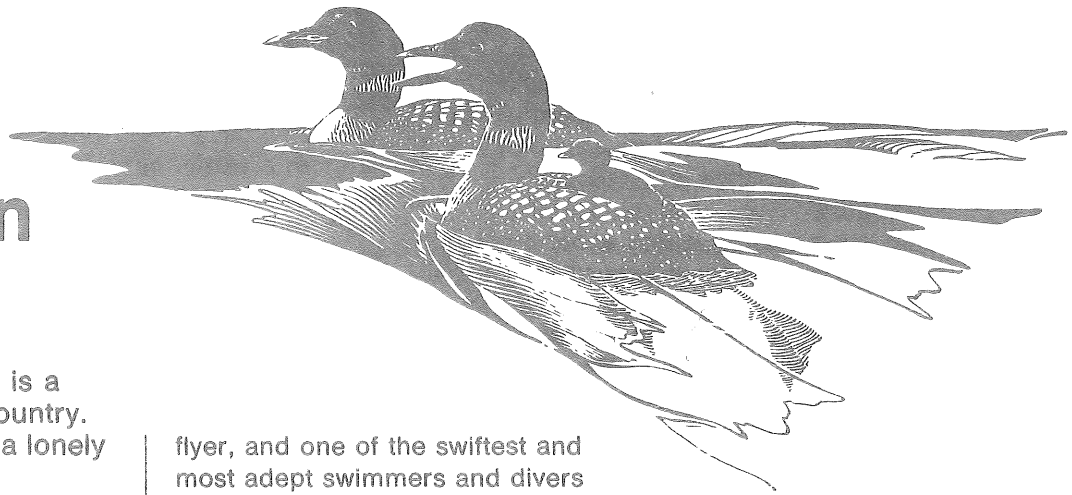


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SERIES



The Common Loon



Minnesota's state bird is a symbol of the north country. The wail of the loon is a lonely cry in the wilderness

What would our northern lakes be like without the haunting cry of the loon? Some people say the loon's call means unspoiled wilderness. When the Ojibwe heard the long cry in the still of the night, they believed it to be an omen of death. In the evenings at Itasca State Park, visitors listen for the lonely "wail" of the loons.

The striking black and white plumage, the haunting and varied calls, and the habit of nesting on remote lakes of the northern wilderness country have given the common loon (*Gavia immer*) its image as the symbol of the wild north country. However, its name is anything but glamorous. Loon is derived from the old English "lumme" meaning lummock, or clumsy one, and is descriptive of the bird's inability to maneuver on land. Because its legs are set far back with only the ankles and feet extending beyond the body, the bird cannot walk well. It moves on land with a shuffling gait, half supported by its breast — very clumsy indeed! But it is a strong

flyer, and one of the swiftest and most adept swimmers and divers of all birds.

There are three very distinctive loon sounds that can be experienced at Itasca, all with special meanings. The high, resonant "wail" invites interaction with other loons. Another common call that can be heard throughout the day, the "tremulo," is a short warble which means the bird is being disturbed. If you hear this laugh-like call while boating on the lake, you have ventured too close to a nesting loon! A third call, the most bizarre of all, is a long, wail between high and low pitches. Appropriately called the "yodel," this call is a sign of aggression or territorial defense. It is used only by male loons.

Nesting and reproduction

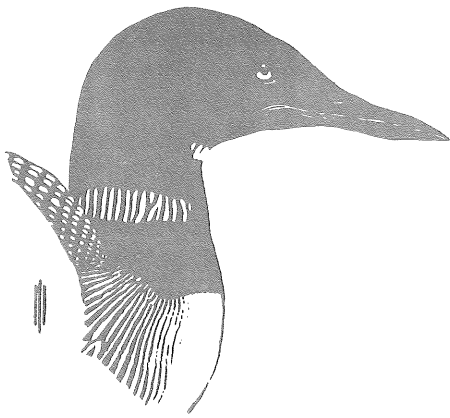
No nest is constructed when the female lays two eggs on a slight, scooped out depression. As incubation proceeds, some vegetation is added until, by hatching, there may be a clear "nest."

In Itasca State Park, loons begin to lay eggs around the middle of May. Incubation is 29

days. If the first nesting is successful, young will hatch about the middle of June.

Islands are preferred nesting sites, but if none is available, the next choice is the edge of a sedge mat or along the lake shore. Shore nesting causes a higher rate of predation. If eggs are lost, then second and even third nesting attempts occur. Excessive people-use of some lakes within the park does disturb nesting, and an untended nest is definitely more vulnerable to predation by skunks, raccoons, mink and crows.

Young are hatched a day apart and cared for by both parents until the end of the summer. Parents feed the young for about 10 weeks. By then the chicks have grown as large as the parents. For the first two weeks, the young may ride on a parent's back and are brooded under a parent's wings while swimming. They are fed a whole fish, which is first splashed and then offered to the young. The parents teach the young to dive for food by throwing them a



small fish which can be retrieved by a shallow dive. Young loons can swim and dive by the second day after hatching, but they tire quickly. Loon chasing by people results very quickly in exhausted chicks and is believed to be one of the causes for mortality of young birds. All loon chasing is prohibited by state law and persons engaging in it are subject to fine.

In most years, there are 40-50 loons on the lakes in Itasca State Park. Ten to 15 young loons may survive past their first week, but it

is not known how many survive to migrate in the fall. Even if all did, the reproductive rate of one young for every four or five adults is too low to be optimistic about maintaining a stable population in the park. But an intelligent effort by all persons visiting the park to avoid disturbing loons may help to increase the reproductive rate of our loons.

Loons can be seen all summer on Lake Itasca, but for most years there has not been a successful nesting on this lake. Motorboats, over-enthusiastic canoeists, and fishermen create a recreational disturbance on the lake throughout the summer and is probably the main reason for unsuccessful nesting.

During the breeding season, paired loons do leave their nesting lake periodically, usually one at a time and generally in the early morning and evening hours. Many loons on Lake Itasca may be birds nesting on other small lakes.

Migration

In August and September, the number of birds on Lake Itasca increases. Gatherings of seven or eight loons is not uncommon. Peace Pipe Vista, the swimming beach, and the shore of the lower campground are all good places to observe loons.

For seven months of the year, the loon is a resident of our state. At the end of October or in early November, the loon migrates to large bodies of water, primarily off the east coast or in the Gulf of Mexico, occasionally on the Great Lakes. In late April, as soon as Minnesota lakes are open, pairs of loons return to the small freshwater lakes of the north.

We hope you will enjoy watching our state bird. We know that long after you have left Itasca State Park, you will remember the thrill of listening to its lonely calls.

This article was written by Judy McIntyre who has studied nesting loons in Itasca State Park. Additional text was added by the Interpretive Program staff.

