

# Common Loon Facts and Phenology

## Did You Know.....

- 🦉 The average weight of a Common Loon in the Great Lakes area is 10 pounds.
- 🦉 Loons eat approximately 2 pounds of fish EACH DAY.
- 🦉 In flight, loons flap their wings about 200 times per minute and reach speeds of approximately 70 miles per hour.
- 🦉 Minimum lake size for nesting loons is reportedly 10 acres, but loon nests have been found on smaller lakes.
- 🦉 The average age of a Common Loon at first nesting is 3-5 years.
- 🦉 A loon can live for approximately 25 to 30 years.
- 🦉 Loons are considered one of the most primitive birds on earth. This means that they have not changed their current form in about 1 million years. The first Loon relative appeared about 25 million years ago and measured about six feet from beak to tail.
- 🦉 There are 5 loon species in the family *Gaviidae* that range across the northern portion of the northern hemisphere. **Arctic** and **Pacific** Loons were once thought to be the same species, but were recently separated into two species. The **Red-throated** Loon is the smallest of the five, while the **Yellow-billed** Loon is the largest. Of course, who could forget the **Common** Loon, the only loon that nests in the lower 48 states!
- 🦉 Until recently, it was accepted that loons, once paired, mated for life. However, through the use of banding, researchers have found this romantic notion to be false. Loons, it seems, are more attached to specific lakes than to their mates.
- 🦉 A good nest site is only one thing loons need to raise chicks. A good supply of fish for the whole family, a quiet bay or shoreline to use as a nursery or chick-rearing area, and water quality that allows for efficient feeding also factor into a loon's "decision" to use a lake.
- 🦉 The Common Loon is protected by State and Federal laws as a migratory, nongame bird. It is also a species of Special Concern in Wisconsin. Current estimates put the Wisconsin loon population at 3,131 nesting adults. This compares to more than 12,000 loons in Minnesota and fewer than 800 in Michigan.
- 🦉 Harassing protected waterfowl carries a fine of \$500 and/or time in jail. Harassing a protected species like the Common Loon carries a \$1000 fine and 90 days in jail. If you witness a violation you are encouraged to call your local DNR enforcement officer or the nearest U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Law Enforcement Office.

# Loon Calls

Loons have four basic calls, though there are some variations. All calls are given by both males and females, except for the yodel that can only be produced by males.

The **yodel** is a territorial call given by male loons. The call begins with three notes that rise slowly and are followed by several undulating phrases. It communicates to any loons in the area “I am a male loon, I’m on my territory, and I’m prepared to defend it.”

The **wail** resembles a wolf howl. Individual loons use this call to locate other loons. If you listen closely, you will hear a wailing loon saying, “where are you?” Indeed, that’s what they are asking.

The **tremolo** sounds like a quavering laugh. It is typically used when loons are disturbed. A variation of the tremolo is the **flight call**. It is usually given over lakes and is a loon’s way of requesting clearance for landing. If a loon on the lake responds with a yodel, the one in the air usually flies on to the next lake.

The **hoot** is a soft, one-note call loons use in close quarters to call to chicks, mates, or even other loons in a social flock. In social groups, the hoot can be thought of as the loon’s way of saying “hi.”

**Phenology:** *(The study of periodic biological phenomena, such as flowering, breeding, and migration, especially as related to climate. From the Greek phainō, “to show, visible, open, evident,” and -ology, a branch of learning.)*

Common Loons arrive on Wisconsin lakes as soon as the ice leaves in mid-to-late April. Most loons in Wisconsin are nesting by mid-to-late May, with eggs beginning to hatch one month later in mid-to-late June. Some pairs that begin nesting later, or who lose their first nest and try a second time, will have eggs hatching into early July. Loons typically lay only two eggs per nesting attempt. Nests with three and even four eggs have been documented, but are rare.

After chicks hatch, they stay on the nest for up to one day until the adults call them off. Once on the water, they are taken to a nursery area, which is usually a secluded bay or protected shoreline. Adult loons feed and protect the chicks until they can dive and catch their own food at approximately eight weeks of age. Adults often leave the chicks and form pre-migratory flocks in early August. Adults begin flying south in late August and early September. Chicks stay on the nesting lakes, feeding and taking their first test flights, until nearly ice-over. One day, they start running across the water, take flight, and head south, where they will stay until they are three years old. Most chicks return to their nesting lake (or one close by) when they have attained the adult’s black-and-white feathers at the age of three. However, current research is finding that many loons do not acquire a nesting territory until they are five years old, so most end up swimming around our lakes, waiting for an open territory.

Contact LoonWatch for more information. LoonWatch is a program of the Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, Northland College, Ashland, WI 54806; (715) 682-1220; [LoonWatch@northland.edu](mailto:LoonWatch@northland.edu); [www.northland.edu/loonwatch](http://www.northland.edu/loonwatch)