

# Looking For Loons

What would a trip to the northwoods be without the sight of a loon feeding in a quiet back bay or the echo of a tremolo call in the twilight? While visitors to the north can find loons on everything from mailboxes to coffee mugs, t-shirts, and placemats, finding and observing real birds is often more challenging. Here are some tips on how to observe loons while minimizing your impacts on nesting and chick rearing.

## Loon Calendar - When to View Loons

The season for loon observation in the Upper Midwest begins shortly after ice-out, usually in late April or early May. When the loons arrive in spring, their first activities are typically to establish their territories and their pair bonds. Loons are territorial birds, defending an area where they feed, nest and raise their young. Territorial behaviors include aggressive running and splashing, and an upright dance across the water—termed the penguin dance. Male loons defend their territories with the *yodel* vocalization. Loon pairs enhance their bond using behaviors such as bill dipping, paired swimming, nest building, and copulation.

Spring is a fascinating time to observe loons but it is also a critical time in the birds' life cycle. People can easily disturb loons and cause nest abandonment. While loons with a history of nesting on more developed lakes can acclimate to human activities, loons on remote lakes can be very sensitive to human presence. If you are observing loons in the spring, stay 200 feet away when possible and view them with binoculars or a spotting scope. If they sound alarms such as the tremolo call (a quavering laugh) or penguin dance, you should leave the area. The best rule of thumb is to stay far enough away from the loons that their activities are not disturbed.

During June, most loons are incubating eggs. It is important not to frighten the birds from the nest during their 28-day incubation period. If disturbed, loons will slip off the nest, leaving the eggs exposed to overheating or cooling and to predators such as Bald Eagles, gulls, and raccoons. After the chicks hatch, the loon family generally moves to a nursery area. This is usually a quiet bay where the youngsters are protected from predators, excessive disturbance, or heavy wave action. Again, care must be taken so that the loon family is not stressed by human presence.

As the chicks mature, the adults will leave them on their own for longer time periods. Adults often are seen in groups during late July and August, calling and swimming in what may seem to be repetitive patterns. This is called the *circle dance* and biologists hypothesize that it is related to migration and staging behaviors.

Perhaps one of the most interesting times to observe loons is during migration. In fall, large groups of loons may gather, or *stage* on the Great Lakes or inland lakes. Adult loons begin to migrate in September, followed by juveniles in late October and early November.

## *Loon Hot Spots*

Though viewing wildlife depends to some degree on luck, there are a few areas in the Upper Midwest where your chances for spotting loons are most favorable. Lakes larger than 500 acres are more likely to support loons although the birds may be more difficult to find on large bodies of water. While some lakes may be accessible by foot, a small boat or canoe may optimize your chances of seeing a loon. Binoculars, a spotting scope, or a telephoto lens for your camera are also helpful tools.

## *Tips for Observing Loons*

In Wisconsin, the counties of Vilas, Oneida, Forest, and Sawyer have large numbers of resident loons. In the northeastern part of the state, lakes near Minocqua, Eagle River, and Mercer are prime locations. In the northwest, the Hayward area is a good starting place. The Turtle-Flambeau Flowage in Iron County and the Chippewa Flowage in Sawyer County have the largest densities of nesting loons in the state. In the summer, it is possible to find non-breeding loons on Lake Superior, particularly around the Apostle Islands.

In Minnesota, Aitkin, Cass, Beltrami, and Hubbard counties are the most densely populated with loons. Many lakes in the Superior National Forest and Voyageurs National Park have resident loons, as well as the area around Brainerd. In fall, large groups of loons often gather before their southerly migration on Lake Mille Lacs.

In Michigan, good loon observation areas include Isle Royale National Park and the Ottawa National Forest's Sylvania Wilderness Area. During spring and fall migration, thousands of loons pass by Whitefish Point in the eastern Upper Peninsula.

LoonWatch is interested in your loon observations. If you visit lakes in the northwoods frequently, we invite you to participate in our annual loon monitoring program in Wisconsin. There are similar monitoring programs in Minnesota and Michigan coordinated by the Minnesota DNR and the Michigan Loon Preservation Association. If you are a less frequent visitor or have limited time, please consider assisting with our five-year survey in Wisconsin. If you would like more information about volunteering, please contact LoonWatch. In the meantime we hope that you have a rewarding loon-watching experience and that you share your enthusiasm for loons with other interested citizens.

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