

Vermont's Common Loon

A GUIDE FOR BOATERS

Since 1978, the Vermont Loon Conservation Project (VLCP) has worked to secure the future of Vermont's loons by collaborating with citizens, lakeshore owners, hydro dam operators, lake associations, state agencies, and conservation groups. More than 50% of Vermont's loons nest in risky locations prone to disturbance or flooding—therefore, VLCP's monitoring, management, and public education programs are essential to ensure solid gains in the number of breeding pairs and chicks that fledge.

VOLUNTEER

You can help! Volunteers are crucial to VLCP's success, and many volunteer opportunities are available—from surveying a lake on our annual LoonWatch day in mid-July to helping all summer long.

To volunteer or report loon sightings please email:
ehanson@vtcostudies.org



CONTRIBUTE

VLCP is funded in part by the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department, but most of our support comes from citizens who care deeply about the Common Loon in Vermont.

If you would like to contribute, please send a check payable to Vermont Center for Ecostudies to the address below, or make an online donation at vtcostudies.org/give. Please note that your gift is for the VLCP. (Writing "Loons" on the check works, too.)

Vermont Center for Ecostudies
PO Box 420, Norwich, VT 05055

VCE is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. All gifts are tax deductible.

April: Loons return soon after ice-out to establish their territories. Small ponds and lakes of less than 200 acres typically support only one loon pair, while larger lakes may host several pairs. Non-breeding intruder loons may target a territory for a "takeover" attempt, which contributes to changes in 20% of mated pairs each year.

May — June: Loons build their nests on sheltered sites very close to the water's edge, often in a marsh, on a small island, or on a human-made nesting raft. Nests surrounded by water are much safer from predators such as raccoons. Females lay 1 or 2 eggs, and both parents share incubation duty over 27-28 days. On average, loons do not nest until they are 6 years old.

June — August: Chicks can swim within hours of hatching. Parent loons are highly protective—they quickly move their chicks to sheltered nursery areas with less wind and wave action, and may stash chicks near shore in threatening situations. Chicks will not touch land until they nest (on average, 6-7 years later).

September — November: Chicks are increasingly independent, learning to feed themselves and gaining flight skills for the upcoming migration. Adults typically depart for migration before their young.

November — April: Vermont loons migrate to ocean wintering grounds mainly off the New England coast. Adults undergo a feather molt in late fall, taking on a coloration similar to that of a full grown juvenile (gray/white).



Loon in molt coloration.



LOON VOCABULARY

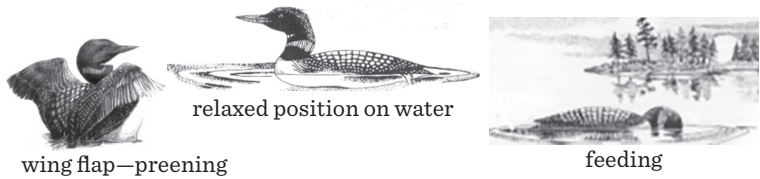
Loons can be curious and may approach you.

Enjoy the moment, quietly and without making sudden movements.

If you encounter a loon, try to maintain a distance of 100 yards, especially if chicks are present.

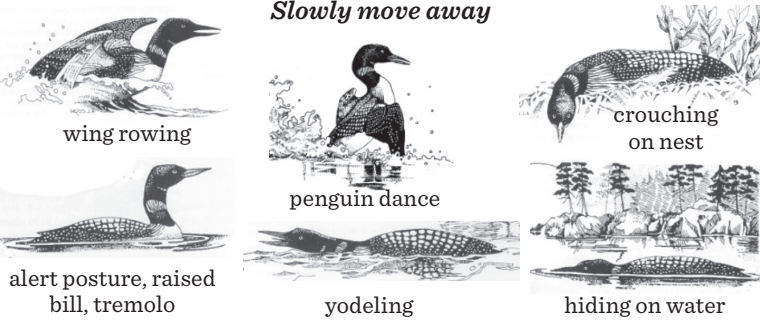
RELAXED LOONS

Observe from a distance



DISTRESSED LOONS

Slowly move away



The mournful “wail” (...ooohh ahhhh...) carries long distances and is used to identify and call to each other; it could also be an initial sign of mild disturbance.

The laughing “tremolo” is an agitated, wavering call, and is a sign of distress or alarm.

The crazy and wild “yodel” is the male’s territorial call, usually directed at unwelcome loons.

Hoots and coos are the quiet, short calls that loon family members use to communicate with each other.

Images from J. McIntyre. 1988. “Common Loon: Spirit of Northern Lakes.”

COMMON LOON—FASCINATING FACTS

- Common Loons are migratory diving birds that nest on many of Vermont’s lakes. They are known for their striking black and white plumage, vivid red eyes, and haunting calls.
- Vermont Loons can weigh from 8 - 14 pounds, while loons from Minnesota to Manitoba may weigh only two-thirds that, likely because of their longer migration distances.
- Current estimates indicate that loons can live between 20-30 years!
- Their solid bones and powerful legs make them excellent divers, but loons need a 100- to 600-foot water “runway” to take off. Once airborne, they can reach flight speeds of 40 - 75 mph.
- With legs situated far back on the body, loons are extremely clumsy on land, coming ashore only to nest.
- There are 4 other loon species: Red-throated, Pacific, Arctic, and Yellow-billed. These close relatives of Common Loons breed in the arctic and boreal regions.
- Most loon chicks return to within 30 miles of their natal lake without the guidance of their parents, after spending 2 - 3 years on the ocean as subadults.



CONSERVATION NOTES



Thanks to the help of lakeshore owners, responsible boaters, and committed volunteers, the number of nesting pairs in Vermont has risen to ~100, recovering from a low of 7 nesting pairs in the 1980s.

Nesting rafts have been used successfully on lakes with fluctuating water levels and heavily developed shorelines.

Nest warning signs have given loons critical quiet space during a time when they are most vulnerable to disturbance.

SHARE THE WATER



Respect: Enjoy loons from a distance through binoculars. When paddling, never pursue loons for a photo or closer look. A loon constantly swimming away from you is a stressed loon.

Avoid Nesting Areas: Not all nest sites are signed. Be aware of potential nests in marshes and on islands; be ready to paddle slowly away from a loon sitting on shore. If a loon leaves its nest, depart the area immediately; the loon will return once it feels safe.

Slow Down: Loon chicks can be difficult to see. If boating at high speeds, note where the loon family is and avoid that area. Please observe the “no wake speed” law within 200 feet of shorelines. Wakes from boats can flood shoreline nests and dislodge eggs, while speeding boats have been known to run over loons, injuring or killing them.

Get the Lead Out: Fish responsibly. Loons, like many birds, ingest small pebbles in order to help digest their food. Unfortunately, if the material they collect contains lead from sinkers or jigs, poisoning and death may result.

Reel In When Loons are Diving Nearby: Loons will take live bait and lures. Nearly 50% of loon deaths are caused by ingesting lead fishing gear or injury from fishing line entanglement and hooks.

Take Action: It is against the Federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act to harass migratory birds in the U.S. Please report any loon harassment to your local game warden or state police.

Plant Native Vegetation: If you own shoreline, let your lawn grow wild to create wildlife habitat. Leave woody debris and underwater plants for aquatic insects, fish, and loons. If you need a mowed area, keep it 15-20 feet from shore.

Enjoy: Vermont’s lakes and ponds can be home to both people and loons, if we treat loons with respect and are good stewards of forested shorelines and underwater habitat.