

# LOON CALLER

VERMONT CENTER FOR ECOSTUDIES



Vermont Loon Conservation Project

## The Healing Power of Volunteering for Loons

BY REBECCA SCOTT  
AS TOLD TO ALDEN WICKER

When I was young, there were very few Common Loons in Vermont—in 1983 only seven pairs of loons were documented. When I was in college in the late 1980s, I saw my first loon on Lovell Lake in southern New Hampshire. This encounter was the first of many magical experiences. Here on the seacoast, during the short gray days in the offseason, I can go down to the ocean for my Common Loon fix.

There's a reason why loons are known as the "call of the wild" or "the sound of the North Woods." Their communication is unique, varied, and detailed. When the male and female are looking to mate or looking for a nest, they're cooing. It just melts my heart. When the parents call the young back in or talk to each other, they hoot, which is so comforting and peaceful. But then I hear the yodel, the tremolo, and everything inside me tightens. *Oh, no, what's happening now?*

In 2014 my husband and I purchased a

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Adult loon on Great Averill Lake, June 2023

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Loon chick at five weeks old on Great Averill Lake, August 2021

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## Where Are My Chicks? | BY ERIC HANSON

For many of the past 30 years, the Vermont Common Loon population has been in overdrive, with growing numbers resulting from high chick productivity. Over the 15 years from 1995 to 2009, both nesting success and chick survivorship averaged more than 80%, and Vermont loon pairs were producing seven to eight chicks over a 10-year period. Although this is an average rate, and some lakes see more success than others, it's no wonder people started expecting "their" loon pair to have a chick almost every year.

But beginning 15 years ago, chick productivity slowed down. By 2023 and 2024, the rate had dropped to about one chick every other year per loon-pair territory (or five chicks over a 10-year period).

That's still higher than in northern and eastern Maine, where only two to three chicks survive per territorial year over a 10-year period. New Hampshire has a rate of about four chicks per 10 years, and the Adirondack region averages between five and six.

As you can see, the loon baby bust in

Vermont is normal. And it's due to several natural and ecologically sound factors.

### INTRUDER LOONS

With more nonbreeding adult loons around looking for a spot in a territory, we are documenting more conflict. VCE loon volunteers used to report the occasional skirmish, but for some pairs, these interactions are now occurring almost daily. Most of these interactions with extra loons are just "conversations." The pair meets the intruder loon, they hoot a few times, swim and dive together for a while, and then something causes the extra loon to either swim or fly off.

However, some of these interactions escalate and can result in pairs spending so much time defending the territory that they abandon the nest or don't nest at all. For example, May Pond is a pretty ideal loon lake, with 116 acres of water and good marsh habitat for nesting. From 1990 to 2007, the pair there nested 17 of 18 years and had 24 chicks, or 1.33 chicks on average per year. But then extra loons started

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The Vermont Center for Ecostudies advances the conservation of wildlife across the Americas through research, monitoring, and community engagement.

The Vermont Loon Conservation Project (VLCP) is a joint program of VCE and the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department.

VLCP restores and maintains Vermont's Common Loon population through monitoring, management, education, and research.

Volunteer information and VLCP publications are available on the VCE website: [vtecostudies.org](http://vtecostudies.org)

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## Loon Volunteering continued from page 1



© REBECCA SCOTT

Adult loon near raft on Great Averill Lake, June 2023

property on Maidstone Lake in Vermont near where I grew up in northern New Hampshire. We started working with Eric and had success; our nest hatched young every year and the chicks survived to migration.

We decided to move to Great Averill Lake in 2019, which is right on the Canadian border. In the summer of 2020, I volunteered to help Eric prepare the loon nest raft, because fluctuating water levels on this dam-controlled lake pose the risk of flooding nests. But the loons didn't like the raft. They must have been freaked out by the aerial guard meant to keep the eagles away.

One day late in the season, we came across the loons nesting on an exposed sandbar about 20 or 30 feet away from the raft. I had recently taken a picture of an eagle sitting right there. I thought it was a crazy nest location. I put the warning signs out, and they laid two eggs. The power company needed to raise the water level, but I sent Eric pictures of the loons on the nest just in time, so they didn't raise the water.

The chicks hatched. The next day's weather was heavy rain with high winds and oceanlike waves. The family of four left their mud-bowl nest just in time—I kayaked over, and the bowl was filling up with water. The loons have been using the raft ever since.

We are just a couple of properties down from where the nest is located. It's like they're our neighbors, and I get to keep quite a good eye on them. Loons are super parents: attentive, committed, and blessed with abundant patience. The chicks are learning something new every single minute of every single day. As a mother myself, I connect with this instinctual behavior.

After a couple of weeks, one of the par-

ents will go off and take a break—flying to another lake, fishing, or taking a nap—while the other stays with the littles. He or she will stash one of them near my shoreline, then take the sibling out in the middle of the lake, teaching it how to dive and catch food. It's loon school! The parent then drops off the first one near shore and takes the sibling out. After a couple of hours go by, you start to hear a wail. And then all of a sudden, the other loon appears out of nowhere, and everyone is together again. It's just so beautiful.

I can see a difference in the personalities of the siblings each year and how they interact. One chick was very curious about me. Most of the photos I take are from my dock, and this bird would come right up and look right at me.

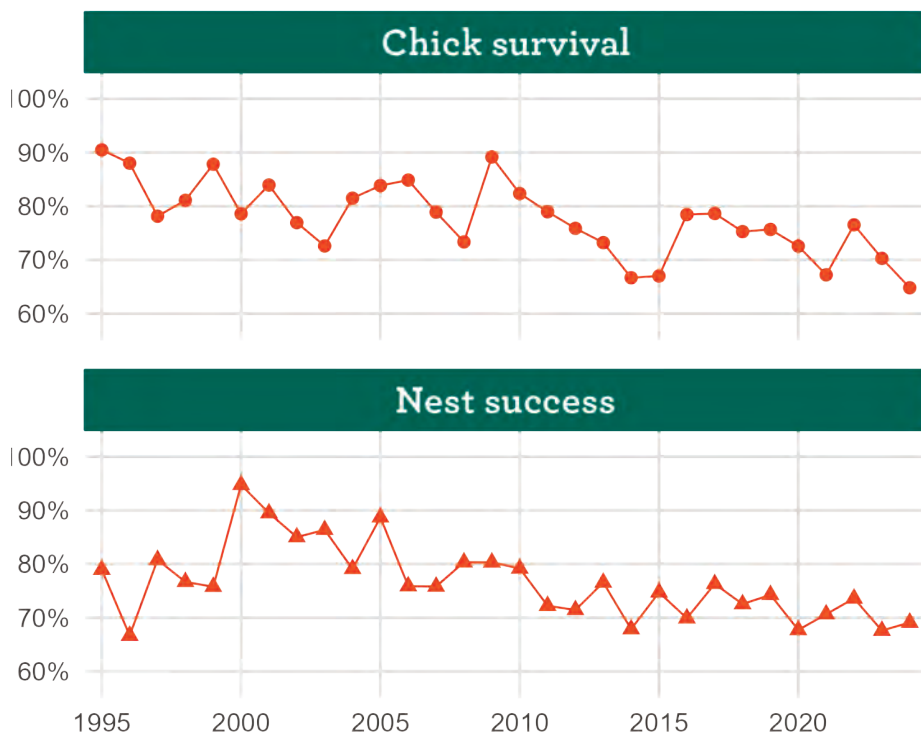
Some people think that loons are mean birds. They're very territorial—they must be to protect their one or two eggs and chicks. But sometimes that's hard to witness. In 2022, I witnessed a rogue loon attack a loon chick.

I thought about capturing the injured chick and bringing it to a rehabilitation center. But the naturalist side in me knew that it was best not to intervene. The loon chick was gone the next day. I was distraught. Eric called me back and explained that this is the natural way of things, that the loon population is keeping itself balanced. Still, it was heartbreaking.

Loons are the canaries of the lake, telling us how healthy the lake is. If they're growing and thriving, then the lake is healthy. Despite rogue loons and eagles, good years and heartbreaking years, volunteering to protect and help the loons has been healing for me as well. **LC**

*Rebecca Scott is a geographer, naturalist, wildlife photographer, and marketing professional who splits her time between the seacoast of New Hampshire and Great Averill Lake in Vermont's Northeast Kingdom. In 2015 she assisted the Essex County Natural Resources Conservation District with the introduction of the Vermont Lake Wise Program at Maidstone Lake, which guides landowners on lake-friendly living practices. A VCE loon project volunteer since 2015, she's generously allowed us to feature her photos throughout this issue of Loon Caller.*





visiting regularly and causing trouble. From 2007 to 2024, the pair has only nested in seven of 17 years, with five chicks surviving. There have also probably been several mate switches in recent years, which disrupt annual nesting because it takes time to establish a new pair bond.

Intruder loons will kill a chick to weaken a pair bond and make a takeover more possible. Extra loons have likely killed the chicks of the Maidstone Lake Southwest pair in three of the past six successful hatch years. This pair did not nest in 2024, and there is a good chance that at least one of the mates is a different loon!

Last summer on Lake Iroquois, the parent loons left their two chicks near the shore while dealing with two extra loons. While they were away, a lake resident witnessed a ring-billed gull kill both chicks.

### EAGLE PREDATION

Although we don't often observe eagles taking chicks and causing nest failure, it is likely happening. Northern Maine's low chick survivorship is directly related to eagle predation of chicks, and eagles are now found statewide in Vermont. Volunteers often observe them harassing loons. In 2024, Ronda Bohovich on Spectacle Pond witnessed an eagle land on the loon raft and eat the egg; and else-

where, at least nine chicks disappeared during periods when Bald Eagles were harassing loons in their territories.

### LOON HOUSING SQUEEZE

The good real estate on large lakes with lots of fish, islands, and suitable marshes is now taken. We are seeing new pairs form on larger lakes with other established loon pairs; these new pairs try to nest in some pretty bad spots, such as sandbars and upland shorelines that are exposed to predators (raccoon, fox, and mink). We think these animals took eggs from more than 20 nests in 2024.

Twenty-five nests were flooded in 2023 and 2024 during extreme rain events, which are becoming more frequent as our climate changes; however, floating nest rafts can provide resiliency. And recreation pressures keep increasing, with more kayakers, other boaters, new home construction, and more docks on our lakeshores.

With all this, it's a wonder that nests are successful at all! It just shows that Common Loons are good parents: vigilant, attentive, caring, and tough when they need to be. We are the ones who need to relax, step back, and trust that seeing fewer chicks is normal and even a sign of our loon population's overall health. **LC**

## LoonWeb Comes to a Lake Near You

BY DANA WILLIAMS

During any week over the summer, you can find our loon biologists, Eric Hanson and Eloise Girard, hard at work out in the field. They're visiting lakes to check for nesting pairs, renovating nest rafts, giving talks about their research, and fielding calls from passionate volunteers.

Unfortunately, Eric and Eloise have to spend about two days each week on administrative tasks, including coordinating with and collecting observations from volunteers, then manually entering data into spreadsheets.

In 2021, VCE received funding from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to redress the effects of the 2003 Bouchard Oil Spill, which killed more than 500 loons. With these settlement funds in hand, VCE's software developer Jason Loomis had an idea. What if we created a way to streamline some of the administrative tasks so that VCE's loon biologists could get out from behind their computers and back into the field?

Thus was born the Loon Digitization Project, or, as we now call it, LoonWeb.

Jason created a prototype that enabled volunteers to enter data directly in their phones, but he wanted to go bigger. So this year, he pulled together a crack team composed of VCE Data Manager Megan Massa, Director of Science Ryan Rebozo, our loon biologists Eric and Eloise, and me, VCE's community science coordinator.

Together, we dreamed up a simple, intuitive, and powerful piece of software that anyone can use, whether you're a tech buff or are allergic to smartphones.

### WHAT IS LOONWEB?

When you go to [loons.vtecostudies.org](https://loons.vtecostudies.org), the first thing you'll see is the Explorer function, which lets you look at lakes across the state and see how loons are faring at each one over time. This visual representation of the data helps Eric and Eloise prioritize their work in the field.

Previously, Eric and Eloise would email back and (continued on page 4)

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

Please support the Vermont Loon Conservation Project and Vermont's loons through a tax-deductible contribution to the Vermont Center for Ecostudies today.

### YOUR DONATION SUPPORTS:

- Statewide loon monitoring
- Loon nesting platforms and nest warning signs
- Volunteer coordination
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- Research on threats to loons

Constituents receive *Loon Caller* and VCE's biannual *Field Notes*.

Mail your donation to:  
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## SHOW YOUR SUPPORT



VLCP is funded in part by the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department's Nongame Wildlife Fund.

Please support the Nongame Wildlife Fund by purchasing the Conservation License Plate and through the tax check-off on your Vermont income tax form.

VLCP thanks the many volunteers and contributors who make loon conservation possible in Vermont.



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forth with each volunteer to ascertain the best lake for them to adopt. LoonWeb's easy sign-up allows volunteers to adopt a local lake for monitoring with just a few clicks. This spring, we're testing this out with volunteers for LoonCount (previously LoonWatch) and LoonMonitor (previously Adopt-a-Lake).

Next, we're working on a data-entry app that will allow you to enter your loon observations directly in your phone, tablet, or computer at home. It will work offline, too, for when you're at a remote pond far from cell service. We're hoping this app will be ready for beta testing by LoonCount day on July 19th.

Although you won't personally interact with it, LoonWeb features another

crucial function. Observations logged by Eric, Eloise, and volunteers are directly uploaded to an online database, where Eric and Eloise can track and review the information, then upload the data to the open-source Global Biodiversity Information Facility (GBIF)—like we do with the rest of VCE's observation data.

OPENNESS is VCE's theme for 2025, and LoonWeb is just the first of what we hope will be several platforms that will enhance the accessibility of our work to members of the public interested in participating and exploring results. We're grateful to our passionate loon volunteers for helping us launch the next generation of community science technology at VCE. **LC**



## Lake Fairlee Loon Nest Cam

BY ALDEN WICKER

For the past three springs and summers, we've been fortunate to have the Lake Fairlee Association loon crew of Sean Brown and Doug Tifft place a webcam near their raft nest. In 2022 and 2024, they captured some great footage of what takes place on a loon nest not only during the 27–28 days of incubation, but also during the preparation time before the first egg. The camera caught extra loons submarining in, a snapping turtle climbing onto the nest in the middle of the night, and the reactions of loons to beavers swimming nearby. All of this is available on YouTube, including short highlight reels for those who cannot stay up to watch around the clock. You can see the highlights right now at: [youtube.com/@LakeFairleeAssociation](https://youtube.com/@LakeFairleeAssociation).

People from across the world have tuned in. In 2023, the loon pair did not nest, so there was less drama that year. But for those happy to let the channel play in the background, the singing birds and piping peepers continued.

The Loon Preservation Committee in New Hampshire maintains two webcams on loon nests at [loon.org/looncam](https://loon.org/looncam). This channel will stream live from the Lakes Region of New Hampshire from early May until mid-July. **LC**