

# The Call of the Wild — Loons on Our Lakes

by Brett Amy Thelen, Science Director

June 2021



*A loon carries two chicks on its back.* photo © Brian Reilly

**W**atch any movie or TV show set in a remote location, and there's a good chance the soundtrack will include the wail of a Common Loon. (Birders often note with dismay that these sounds are frequently added to scenes that are filmed where loons do not occur, or at times of year when the birds are not vocal. Needless to say, Hollywood is not known for its ecological accuracy.)

The loon's call has a hold on us, even for people (say, sound effect engineers) who have never heard it in real life. Haunting, ethereal, primal, it evokes the wild – and you can experience it on dozens of our local lakes every summer.

## Nesting Loons in the Granite State

Most of our loons overwinter off the coasts of Maine, New Hampshire, and Massachusetts, returning to the Monadnock Region in early spring. Miraculously, they often arrive inland on the very same day their ponds ice out. Nesting can begin as early as mid-May, with more than 50% of all loon nests in the Granite State initiated by the first week in June. If a nest fails due to flooding, predation, or other factors, the loon parents may try again through mid-July.

The physiological adaptation that makes loons exceptional swimmers and divers – namely, legs positioned very far back on the body, to serve as both motor and rudder for swift pursuit of fish, crayfish, and other aquatic delicacies – also makes them virtually incapable of walking on land, so their nests must be built close to the water’s edge.

They often select sites on small islands, which minimizes the risk of losing their eggs to land-based predators such as raccoons and foxes, though they may also nest on marsh hummocks, floating bog mats, or even muskrat lodges. Last year, the loons on Child’s Bog in Harrisville built a creative, if ill-fated, nest on an exposed tree stump perched a foot above the surrounding water. (Sadly, they had to abandon this nesting attempt when water levels dropped and they could no longer haul themselves onto the stump to incubate their eggs.)

In places where shoreline development or fluctuating water levels limit successful nesting at natural sites, the Loon Preservation Committee (LPC) may also install artificial nest rafts, which rise and fall with surrounding water levels. According to the LPC, nest rafts have produced roughly 25% of the loon chicks hatched in New Hampshire over the past two decades. This summer, LPC biologists and volunteers have floated more than 100 rafts statewide, including on the aforementioned Child’s Bog and Spoonwood Pond in Nelson. Whether the loons decide to use them is another thing entirely. (The Spoonwood and Child’s Bog loons have thus far turned up their bills at the rafts.)

If you ever come across a loon on a nest while paddling, fishing, or hiking along a pond shore, be sure to give it wide berth, especially if you see it flattening its body low over the nest or stretching its neck toward the water. This “hang-over” position is defensive, and means the loon is preparing to escape into the lake due to a perceived threat (you!), leaving the eggs or newly-hatched chicks vulnerable to predators, heat stress, or cold.

It’s also vital to give loons space – at least 150 feet – while out on the water, and to learn to interpret loon behaviors that mean you’ve gotten too close. Although the wail is the most likely loon call to make its way into a suspense film, loons make several different sounds that indicate it’s time to back away. Males will yodel when they feel threatened, and birds of either sex will let out a tremolo, or “crazy laugh,” in response to perceived threats such as humans or other loons who might be intruding on their territory. (Tremolos are also common during night chorusing, as a duet between loon pairs, and while flying.) You can listen to recordings of these and other loon sounds at [loon.org](http://loon.org).

## Lead: A Leading Loon Threat

In 1975, when the Loon Preservation Committee was founded, fewer than 100 pairs of nesting loons remained in New Hampshire. In 2020, after more than 40 years of intensive monitoring, management, and protection of loons and their nests by the LPC, the Granite State hosted 321 pairs.

But our loons aren't out of the woods yet. In addition to the risks posed by shoreline development, chemical contaminants, human recreational pressure, and climate change, loons are highly vulnerable to lead poisoning resulting from the accidental ingestion of lead fishing tackle. In fact, lead poisoning is the leading cause of adult loon mortality in New Hampshire, accounting for 42% of all documented adult loon deaths in our state since 1989. The sale of lead sinkers and lead-headed jigs weighing one ounce or less has been prohibited in New Hampshire since 2016, but lead still lives on in timeworn tackle boxes.

The average pair of Granite State loons fledges just one chick every other year, but loons can live upwards of 30 years, offering ample opportunity to produce young if they aren't first laid low by lead. So, the most important thing you can do for our loons is to use only non-lead fishing tackle, and to spread the word to all your fishing friends. Many local transfer stations have secure boxes for disposing of lead tackle, and the LPC and New Hampshire Fish and Game now offer a lead tackle buyback program. Since 2018, they've collected over 14,800 lead sinkers and jigs, any one of which could have killed a loon had it remained in circulation.

Years ago, while volunteering with a loon banding project, a friend and I paddled across Willard Pond at 2 a.m. under a sliver of August moon. While we waited in the dark for the biologists to give the cue that our assistance was required, the wails of the loons reverberated in the bowl formed by Bald Mountain and Goodhue Hill – a raucous echoing that we felt in our bones. It was a magic summer night and I think of it often, with gratitude for the Loon Preservation Committee and the countless volunteers who've worked with them to ensure that this iconic call of the wild still rings out on the lakes we love.

This summer, spend some time on or near the water. Keep your eyes and ears open, and you might just have your own magic moment with loons – and not just on the silver screen. 🐾



This article was published in the *Monadnock Ledger-Transcript's* "Backyard Naturalist" column on June 29, 2021.