The Most Magical Bird in the World: The Common Loon

Presentation & 2017 Loon Report by Jon Wefald
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Whenever I see a loon on Bay Lake, I stop everything I am doing. I am transfixed because I am watching an historic and extraordinary bird. I am watching the most magical bird in the entire world.

Why would I make this statement? I make this statement for a multitude of reasons.

The loon is a bird from the deep recesses of the past. The loon is a bird of monumental calmness, serenity & confidence.

There are no other bird species in the world related to the five living species of the loon family (including ducks and geese).

The Common Loons of Minnesota are a singular species of birds. In short the loon is a species unto itself.

How important are the loons for the people of Minnesota? Let me ask you this question. How many birds and even animals have gained the reverence and admiration of a multitude of writers and poets? How many? Not many, if any.

Let me quote from one of Minnesota's most legendary poets: Listen carefully to what Sigurd Olson wrote about loons.

"Each night we sat there looking down the waterway, listening to the loons filling the darkening narrows with wild reverberation music but it was when they stopped that the quiet descended, an all-pervading stillness that absorbed all the sounds that had ever been spoken. No one spoke. We sat there so removed from the rest of the world and with a sense of complete remoteness that any sound would have been sacrilege." – Sigurd Olson

In his excellent book, ***Just Loons: A wildlife Watcher's Guide***, Alan Hutchinson writes that the Common Loon *"is a symbol of wilderness and of special places yet untarnished. It is a touchstone to the natural world and to our past and, perhaps, to things unknown. Could that be why the call of the loon provokes such awe and mystery?"*

How many people have heard of somebody who left their entire inheritance to a bird?

A school teacher, who spent summers on lakes from Bemidji to International Falls by the name of Iva Weir, left her entire estate valued at $1.8 million to the Nature Conservancy to benefit & preserve the one bird she valued so much: The Common Loon of Minnesota.

How special and revered are loons to the people of Minnesota, New Hampshire, Ontario & Canada?

The people of **Minnesota** have mandated that the Common Loon is the state bird.

The Common Loon is the provincial bird of **Ontario**.

The people of **Canada** revere the Loon so much that it is depicted on the Canadian one-dollar coin.

How about the people of **New Hampshire** and their affection and love for the loon. The people of New Hampshire revere their loons like we do on Bay Lake, but the truth is that New Hampshire has about 400 loons. In 1975, the lovers of the New Hampshire loons set up a State Preservation Committee to enhance and preserve their loons. With 400 loons, would you believe that New Hampshire has 500 loon watchers? Most important despite the State only having 400 loons, New Hampshire loves their loons so much it is the state bird.

How many here have seen the movie ***On Golden Pond***, staring Henry Fonda, Katherine Hepburn and Jane Fonda……and features about 6 of New Hampshire's loons on the state's largest lake, Squam Lake. Have you ever noticed how many loons and their 4 calls are in so many movies, even places with no loons?

The State of Minnesota compared to New Hampshire has 12,000 loons.

Think of this, in the 48 contiguous states there are 22,000 loons and Minnesota with 12,000 loons has over one-half.

Why does Minnesota have so many loons? When you look at loon states like Wisconsin and Michigan you can see why Wisconsin only has 3,500 loons and Michigan 2,500. Wisconsin and Michigan are stopped by Lake Superior.

Duluth, Minnesota is on the very western edge of Lake Superior.

Thus from Duluth, MN, and Grand Rapids, MN, to the Canadian Border are over 200 miles of hundreds of cold pure lakes with fish and surrounded by pine trees.

So, the number of loons are:

Nationally	22,000
Minnesota	12,000
Wisconsin	3,500
Michigan	2,500
Maine	4,000-5,000
New Hampshire	400

Over the past 10 years going around the Bay Lake, my estimate of the number of loons per each summer numbers 32 to 35 loons.

In June, 2017, we counted 29 loons the first week and 28 the second week—with 10 chicks. On Monday, July 10, 2017, we counted 37 loons and a number of bigger chicks.

In ***Just Loons***, Alan Hutchinson writes that *"Loons as we know them today have existed for at least twenty million years! Humans have only walked this earth for perhaps three to four million years……The loon, therefore, has successfully completed twenty million annual migrations from nesting to wintering grounds. Loons have succeeded in raising the next generation twenty million times. Loons have filled summer nights with their ancient, wailing calls for twenty million years".*

Loons are beloved for many reasons: Their beauty, their diving, their calmness, sereneness and confidence.

Trumping all of those characteristics are their four calls:

Tremolo, Wail, yodel & hoot

The **tremolo** call is known as the laughing call; the crazy laugh used when the loon feels threatened or is requesting clearance for landing. One critic says the tremolo call "has the feel of a hysterical soprano".

The **wail** call is the quintessential loon call because it is one loon saying to another loon "where are you". One writer compares the call to dialing a "1" when placing a long distance call and other loons get in the conversation. The wail call rises and falls in pitch and often sounds like the howling of a wolf.

The **yodel** call represents a warning or danger. The male loon uses this call as a territorial Imperative call. When the male loon sees an Eagle eg it rears up high in the water and "crooks it's neck".

The **hoot** call is a short signal call that an adult loon will use in approaching a group of other loons. With the hoot call the loon is saying "hi".

Some Key Loon characteristics:

Adult male Loon – 7 to 17 pounds
Adult female loon – 6 to 14 pounds
Adult loons have a 5 foot wingspan & measure 3 feet from bill to feet.
Loons have a thick neck and long black bill.
Loons are bottom heavy and their legs are set way, so they are very clumsy on land.
So loons are in the water 99.9% of the time.
Loons are great divers. They can dive 250 feet and stay under water for 5 minutes.
Loons eat about 2 pounds of fish every day…they love perch.
Loons have to be great fliers because they are bottom heavy. They have to take off like an airplane simultaneously using their feet and wings. Because they are bottom heavy, loons need up to 150 yards or a football field and a half to get into the air. Once in the air they need to fly at least 60 mph. At 58 or 59 they start falling.

Loons normally are calm, serene and confident and we see that whenever we are out on our pontoons and speed boats.

But remember this: Loons are the absolute **Masters of the Lake**. It is not the ducks, geese and sea gulls that rule Bay Lake. It is the Loons.

While we see loons as calm, serene and confident, loons have a **territorial imperative**. Loons are strong and powerful and their long black bill can be employed as a spear. Geese and their goslings and ducks and their ducklings should beware of loons.

There are countless examples where people have seen loons spear to death ducklings and goslings and even adult geese.

The social gatherings of 5 to 10 loons that take place from mid-July to early September.

Ruth Ann and I saw 3 social gathering on last Monday night, July 10 of 5-8 loons per gathering.

It is somewhat like a PTA meeting where they communicate and do circle dancing and splash diving.

In mid-September to late September adult loons start preparing for their long flight to the Gulf of Mexico. There are three staging lakes in Minnesota: Mille Lacs (up to 2,000 loons), Lake Winnibigoshish & Lake Superior.

They rest and feed for weeks waiting for a Northern or NW wind. The loons head to the Gulf of Mexico at speeds of 90-100 mph at 7,000 to 8,000 feet.

In the Gulf of Mexico:

The loons go from fresh water to salt water and go from eating fresh water fish to eating salt water fish.

The loons change color in the Gulf from their beautiful summer colors to black and grey and even their red eyes turn black.

The young chicks leave about 3 weeks after the adults because they are not prepared to fly in mid-September despite practicing from July on.

The young loons will stay in the Gulf of Mexico for 2 -3 years.

80% of all loons and the young loons will return to the lake they were born on.

When I ask myself why the loon is the flagship bird of Minnesota, the answer becomes obvious:

What other bird has 4 calls that remind us of a long forgotten, but historic and pristine wilderness?

What other bird is looked upon as peaceful, confident and mysterious and as both profound and enigmatic.

None, but the Common Loon.

The Loon's Legacy:

In the book In ***Love of Loons***, Kate Crowley and Mike Link sum up well the feeling that so many people have of this elegant bird: *"The loon has taken on a significance that goes way beyond it's beauty as a bird, the biology of the species, and the struggle for survival. The loon is ingrained in Today's society a measure of our concern for the land, our relationship with the water and our pleasures in the wilderness."*

In their book ***Call of the Loon***, Evers and Taylor include a poem by the great naturalist, Sigurd olson, that sums up so eloquently why biologists and people on northern lakes love the loon so much:

"That night it was still, and in the moonlight the loons began as I heard them before, first the wild excited calling of a group of birds dashing across the water, then answers from other groups until the entire expanse of the lake was full of their music. We sat around until long after dark and listed.

– Sigurd Olson