



THE COMMON LOON

As Minnesota's state bird, the common loon holds a special place in the hearts of many Gunflint Trail residents. During the summer, loons frequent the Saganaga Lake bay outside Chik-Wauk Museum and Nature Center. In 2011, loons began nesting in the bay on an artificial nesting platform installed by Chik-Wauk volunteers in May of that same year.

When do loons nest?

Loons usually begin nesting when they're about six years old. (Loon can live 25-30 years.) The loons pair at Chik-Wauk often lay their first eggs during the third week of May. If the nest is destroyed by a predator, the pair may re-lay in June. Loons usually lay one to two eggs, laying each egg about a day apart. Both parents take turns incubating the olive green, three-inch eggs for about 28 days until the chicks hatch. Disturbance by other wildlife or humans can interrupt incubation and cause a nest to fail or be abandoned.

Where do they nest?

Because their far set legs make it difficult for them to move on land, loons usually nest close to shore. They prefer to nest on islands for greater protection from predators like skunks, otters, minks, seagulls, crows, ravens, and eagles.

How do parents care for their chicks?

Loons gather food for the chicks and the chicks often ride on their parents' backs during their first three weeks to conserve their energy and stay warm.

What's the platform made out of?

Chik-Wauk uses a Biohaven Floating Island constructed of durable, non-toxic post-consumer plastic and planted with native water plants. The island is left in the bay year-round. The floating island replaced a handmade PVC platform used in 2011. The platform protects the loons from many predators, although once the chicks hatch, the loon family becomes vulnerable to eagles, snapping turtles, and northern pike.

Unique features of a loon:

Unlike most birds, loons have solid bones which allow them dive deeply and quickly when looking for food. (Loons eat about two pounds of fish each day!) However, those solid bones make it difficult for loons to become airborne. In fact, loons need a ¼ mile "runway" to take off, which is why they're usually not found on lakes less than 10 acres in size.

According to Northland College's LoonWatch, loons use four distinctive calls to communicate: yodel, wail, tremolo, and hoot. Male loons yodel to mark their territory. Loons wail to locate other loons, while the tremolo is used when loons are excited, disturbed, or looking for clearance from other loons to land on a lake they're flying over. Loons in close quarters – chicks and parents, mates, and members of a social flock – communicate with soft hoots. *(continued on other side)*



LOON INFORMATION

Loons' summer habitat is concentrated in the upper Midwest in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. According to Northland College's Loon Watch, approximately 12,000 loons summer in Minnesota each year.

Each fall, loons migrate to their wintering grounds in the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic Coast. Adult loons migrate first, in late September or early October. Loon chicks leave in October or November. Loons fly approximately 70 miles an hour. Adult loons make this 1000 mile journey each fall and spring.

Loon chicks remain in the wintering grounds until they develop the loon's striking black and white plumage at three years old. According to Larry Backlund of the MN Bound Loon Cam, "The accepted wisdom is that when they come back after three years on the Gulf of Mexico they will return to the lake that they were born on."

How you can help loons:

1. View loons from a distance. The MN Department of Natural Resources recommends a 200-foot viewing distance.
2. Be a responsible boater. Careless boat traffic can cause loss of eggs and kill baby chicks.
3. Keep your dogs on a leash when near a nest or loon chicks.
4. Don't fish near loons. When you do fish, use no-lead fishing sinkers and jugs.
5. Harassment of wildlife is against the law. If you see loons being harassed, report it to your local DNR office. Videotaping the event and/or recording the vessel's registration number is helpful.

Additional Resources

Loon Resource Folder in Chik Wauk Museum and Nature Center reading corner

<http://www.mnbound.com/>

<http://www.northland.edu/sigurd-olson-environmental-institute-loonwatch-about-loons.htm>

www.floatingislandinternational.com

Watch the Chik-Wauk loons:

www.chikwauk.com

