

Loon Nesting

Development on lakes can significantly impact loon nesting success, mostly through an increase in nest disturbance from a number of human activities.

Artificial nesting platforms can enhance overall nesting success and contribute to a gradual increase in loon populations, particularly in situations where nesting loons are under intense disturbance pressure.



Common Loon *Gavia immer*

Habitat: Freshwater lakes or large ponds, larger lakes may have multiple pairs with territories defended by each pair.



Range: Common loons nest across most of forested Canada and up into Alaska, then migrate to the east and west coasts of North America and as far south as Gulf of Mexico in winter.

The loon is more closely related to the penguin and albatross than it is to North American waterfowl such as ducks and geese.

The loon is probably best known for its voice and wild dances. Loons are capable of delivering a diverse range of eerie wails, wild laughter, haunting yodels and hoot and whistle calls. For many people, the call of the loon is the sound of the outdoors in summer. But it is also a very beautiful bird with striking plumage, a collar of white stripes and intricate patterns of white and black feathers on wings and back.

Loons are large, heavy birds, with wing spans often greater than 1.2 m. The legs and large webbed feet are set far back on the body, making them good surface swimmers and extremely efficient divers. But on land loons are awkward and slow. They typically build their nests on shorelines or on small islands, constructing a mound close to the water using available vegetation. Loons will also nest on floating bog mats.

Although common loons are not considered endangered and are relatively abundant across their range in Canada, their range has been significantly reduced in large areas of the U.S. The birds are vulnerable to the impacts of human activities. Recent studies show that loons can be poisoned by the lead in "sinkers" used by anglers. Their nests are sometimes disturbed by the wake waves created by powerboats. On lakes with heavy recreational watercraft traffic, loons are sometimes injured or killed in collisions with boats. Extensive shoreline development also increases the potential for nest disturbance from several sources. Water level manipulations can flood loon nests.

Floating Loon Nests

Artificial nesting platforms, if designed and installed properly, are readily used by loons, can supplement natural nesting sites, and can offer enhanced protection from land-based predators. Floating platforms are also very effective in mitigating the potentially negative affects of rising and falling water levels. Overall nesting success of loons is often enhanced after platforms are installed, which can lead to a gradual increase in local and regional loon populations.

Platforms should not be expected to "attract" loons to a lake. They will be most effective when loons are already prospecting for breeding sites, on lakes where there is a high potential for nest disturbance.

Consider that a nesting platform may not be needed where a pair is already nesting successfully. A nesting platform will be visible and may actually increase the potential for human disturbance, leading to a reduction in nesting success. Platforms are most effective where loons are experiencing low nesting success due to shoreline disturbance, predation, or water level fluctuations.



Constructing Nests

Site Selection

Site selection is important. Pick a site protected from heavy wind and wave action - a quiet bay with some shallow water and easy access to deep water, preferably with low potential for disturbance.

Construction

Materials required:

- cedar logs or large cedar posts for 1.2 m by 1.2 m frame (not treated lumber)
- vinyl-coated chain-link fence, plastic snow-fence or other suitable material for the bed of the nest
- two anchors (cinder blocks work) with anchor chains or cable (plastic-coated to resist rusting)
- moss and sod with mixed vegetation for the nest bed, straw, bulrushes, long grasses or other natural material for the nest

Use the cedar logs or posts to construct a 1.2 m by 1.2 m frame. Include inner beams to support the nest.

Install buoyancy aids only when necessary (tethered water-tight containers).

Stout timbers provide the best buoyancy. Design the frame so that there is easy access for the loons on at least one side - with the edge no more than 10 cm above the surface of the water.

Secure the vinyl-coated chain-link fence or plastic snow fence to the top of the frame. This will form the bed for the nesting material.

Installation

Install the floating loon nesting platform, prior to nesting season, on water at least one meter deep. Distance from shore will depend on slope of the lake bottom and disturbance-potential from wind and boaters. Secure the platform with two good anchors (on opposite corners). Provide slack in the anchor chains for changing water levels.

Build a "natural" bed for the nest on top of the fencing, using sod, moss and other material gathered on the shoreline. Make sure the bedding material will not blow away. Place nesting material (e.g. straw or grasses) on the nest bed.

Consider posting the area with floating signs (placed 100 to 140 m from the nest) during the incubation period urging people to stay clear. Also consider informing local property owners that the nesting structure is in place. Talk to local Ministry of Natural Resources staff and conservation groups before installing a floating nesting platform.

Maintenance

Monitor your platform regularly to ensure it is floating well, is in good shape and is not drifting. Pull the nest out of the water and above the high water mark after the end of nesting season each year to allow the timbers to dry. Make any necessary repairs. Place new nesting material and re-install the platform prior to the following nesting season.



Floating Loon Platform

An avian guard (camouflaged to reduce visibility) or overhead cover will increase the effectiveness of your loon nesting platform. The overhead cover protects the eggs and hatchlings from avian predators, reduces visibility of the nest, and reduces the flushing of adults from the nest during egg incubation, all of which contribute to nesting success.

