

## Common Loon FAQ's

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- *What is the difference between a loon and a duck, and why are loons special?* - Loons and ducks belong to two different families of birds, such as hawks and eagles. Unlike a duck, loons can **dive up to 250 feet** in search of food, hold their breath for almost two minutes, and swim from 10-20 miles per hour! Loons have a heavier bone structure. And while they have webbed feet like a duck, their feet are placed further back on their body to allow them to dive to greater depths, but disadvantages of **not being able to walk on land**.
- *When do loons arrive on our lake?* - During the month of April, depending on ice thaw. With the exception of southern Ontario, West Michigan is the southernmost breeding grounds for the common loon in the entire US; with the majority nesting in Canada and as far as the Arctic Circle! There are currently only an estimated 500-700 nesting pairs in Michigan; the majority are in the Upper Peninsula. Loons will choose a lake with clear water, which enables them to see their prey easier as their red eyes filter light underwater while they hunt. A loon's choice of lake often indicates the good quality of the lake water and available ecosystem for their preferred diet of fish, amphibians, crustaceans, crayfish, salamanders, and the like.
- *Do loons mate for life?* - Not necessarily, although they often pair up for many years (and, if they are lucky, they can live into their 30's!).
- *What about nesting?* - Loons gather reeds and other lake material and make a rather fragile nest, their preferred location being most often on an island that tends to be less subject to predators. Egg incubation is about 28-32 days. Both parents take turns incubating the eggs. They try to nest just a couple weeks after they arrive on the lake. Because loons nest at the waters' edge, they are **easily disturbed by excessive boat traffic and wakes**, and are displaced by human residential activity. If you are out boating and see a loon, keep some distance between you and the loon so you do not disturb it.
- *Why would a loon nest fail?* - There are a variety of reasons. Predators, like eagles, muskrats, racoons, etc. may attack a nest and have the eggs for "lunch". **Wake from boats may wash-out a nest. Human interference (getting too close)** can cause a loon to "jump ship" by sliding in to the water, increasing the risk of predators snatching the eggs, creating a case of abandonment, or worse, **causing the eggs to roll into the water**.
- *Do loons re-nest if their original nest has failed?* - Yes, they often do. They may choose the same location or move to a spot that might be safer for them.
- *How many chicks do loons have?* - One to three. One is most common. Two are rather special. Three are quite rare.
- *How do loon chicks differ from ducklings?* - Again, loons are a separate species and as a matter of fact, loons do not like ducks! Most ducklings are able to feed themselves when they leave the nest. Loons chicks depend on their parents for food for about the first twelve weeks of their lives. Both species depend on their parents for protection until they fledge (fly). For their first couple of weeks in life, loon chicks are not able to float over wakes (like ducklings) so are subject to drowning until they are more "waterproof" and their downy fills in.
- *There is a baby loon(s) all alone in the lily pads/reeds, etc., in front of my house! What should I do?* - Nothing. (Well, watch for predators and chase 'em off!) This is called "parking". The loon parents will deposit their youngsters in what they think is a safe place while they are distracting or fighting off predator - sometimes eagles, sometimes humans - and often other loons that are vying for the territory. "Invading" loons are known to sometimes commit "loon infanticide" where they will kill the chicks in an attempt to gain territory.
- *When do the chicks fledge (fly)?* - At about eleven or twelve weeks. They will attempt take-offs and landings (and often "crash land" into the water). No worries, it's part of the learning process.

- What are the biggest threats to loons' survival? - There are many. **Predators**, such as eagles or muskrats, or being run over by a **boat or jet ski** (which is heartbreaking). Abandoned **fishing line, hooks**, and of even more concern, **lead** from fishing gear or other types of lead pellets. When the loon ingests even one or two pellets, it can cause death. The lead is deposited into their gizzard where it's ground up and then dispersed throughout the body. And if you see a **loon on land**, it's in trouble. Loons only go to land to copulate, nest or if they are injured or sick.
- How far away from loons should people stay? - The recommended distance to maintain between people/boats and loons is **150 feet**, or one and a half length of a football field. Although, being curious, loons will sometimes approach your boat when you are anchored or floating around, as they are intelligent and social creatures with their own personalities!
- We love hearing the loons call. Do their calls have meaning? - Indeed they do! There are three distinct loon calls. 1. **The Wail**: This is loon communication indicating their presence and/or location to their mate and/or family. It's the call we all love! 2. **The Tremolo**: This is an initial alarm call. A predator may be in the area, a human may be too close, or the loon may be feeling threatened. 3. **The Yodel**: This is that high pitched screeching (only emitted by the male loon), which signifies danger is imminent. 4. **The Hoot**: If you are lucky enough to have the loon family come by your dock, you will also hear little coos and almost warbles as they talk to the chicks. Sometimes, you will hear this communication between the couple in the spring before the chicks hatch. It's a heartwarming moment to experience!
- When do loons migrate, and where do they go? - Loons migrate most often in September, but loons with late-hatching chicks may hang around till the end of September. Sometimes, the chicks will be left to fend for themselves for a few weeks, till the urge to migrate kicks in. They may stay until the end of October. Loons from our area migrate to the southeast coast of the US or to the Gulf of Mexico for their "winter vacation".
- A frequent end of season question is, "The adult loon has lots of white on its face. Is that normal?" - Absolutely. This is called a "pre-molt", as loons are starting to molt their incredible black/white/iridescent tuxedo-style plumage that we see here in the breeding season, into a more bland white/brown feathering, similar to the juveniles. They will do another molt in late winter back into their stunning breeding plumage prior to making the trip back up north.

The webbed feet of a loon are meant for deep water diving and **they cannot walk on land** the same way that ducks and geese can. **If you see a loon on land, it's in trouble.** *Please contact the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in Grand Rapids for more assistance if you see a suspected injured or stranded loon at (616) 361-6109, or through their Facebook Messenger box, located on their business page.*

Loons are a threatened species, and beloved by many and subject of much folklore! Loons have been said to restore sight to blind children, heal the sight of medicine men and that they were the recipient of a "gift of thanks" – their necklace of shells for all to see. Let's all do what we can to understand them and assist in their survival.

Links with more information:

[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Common\\_Loon/id](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Common_Loon/id)

<https://www.michigan.gov/dnr/about/get-involved/loon-rangers>

<https://loon.org/>

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