

Common Loon



Gavia immer



Photo by
<https://pixnio.com/fauna-animals/birds/common-loon-bird-sitting-on-nest>

Physical Description:

Common loons are large water birds, measuring 26.0 to 35.8 inches (66 to 91 centimeters) in length and weighing 88.2 to 215.2 ounces (2,500 to 6,100 grams). They have thick necks, sharp bills, long bodies and short tails (usually not visible). In breeding plumage, both sexes have striking black heads with white collars, white breasts, and black backs with white checkering. Adults in non-breeding plumage are brownish gray with white throats and breasts, partial white collars, and white around the eyes. Under-parts are white in all plumages. Juvenile plumage is similar to non-breeding plumage. Like other loon species, they have their feet positioned far back on their bodies which stick out beyond the tail (unlike ducks and cormorants), looking like wedges. In flight, this bird looks stretched out, with a long, flat body and long neck and bill. They have wing spans of 40.9 to 51.6 inches (104 to 131 centimeters).

Natural History:

Common loons are considered medium-distance migrants. They migrate singly or in small flocks, just offshore low over the water. Over land, they will fly higher. In the breeding season, common loons can be found on large secluded lakes with plenty of room for takeoff, deep inlets and bays, and a good supply of small fish. These lakes can be in forested areas in mountains or lowlands. Common loons are actually excellent indicators of water quality as they require crystal-clear lakes (which makes it easier for them to see prey underwater). In winter, common loons are usually found on salt water, typically in shallow areas close to shore. They are only rarely found more than several miles offshore. Common loons that migrate across interior North America find large lakes and rivers to move between on their way north and south. In winter, they are solitary while feeding, but they congregate in loose flocks at night. Before diving, they sometimes swim along the surface with heads partly submerged, looking for prey. Their diet consists of mostly fish. Common loons are expert anglers. Though people may only see these loons disappear from the surface with a dive and reappear with a fish in their bill to be swallowed headfirst, their fishing pursuits underwater are quite amazing. They can shoot through the water extremely fast, propelled by powerful thrusts of their feet. When their quarry changes direction, loons can execute an abrupt flip-turn: they extend one foot laterally as a pivot brake

and kick with the opposite foot to turn 180 degrees in a fraction of a second. They swallow small prey under water and bring larger prey to the surface. North American common loon populations are stable and healthy overall, and between 1966 and 2015 populations remained stable, and slightly increased in the U.S., according to the North American Breeding Bird Survey. The species rates an 11 out of 20 on the Continental Concern Score, and is not on the 2016 State of North America's Birds' Watch List. The North American Waterbird Conservation Plan lists them as a Species of Moderate Concern. It is not known if the population of common loons in Washington is increasing, stable, or decreasing. Common loons have declined in Washington in the last century, but there are no good data on their historic distribution in the state. Records of known nesting have increased in the past 15 years, but this may be due to increased sampling efforts. Because there are known threats and the species is recognized as vulnerable, common loons are classified as a state 'sensitive species' by the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. The Gap Analysis Project also lists it as a species at risk.

Reproduction:

Loons nest in quiet, protected, hidden spots of lakeshore, typically in the lee of islands or in a sheltered back bay. Islands, logs, and floating debris will attract nesting loons. Lakes need to be at least 49 acres in size so that there is plenty of room for takeoff. Loons are monogamous, and pair bonds typically last about five years. In early spring (April/May), as soon as the ice melts, loon mates arrive back on their lake separately. If one year one of the mates doesn't return, the other will quickly pair up with another mate. Courtship consists of swimming in circles and synchronous dives. Loons can't walk well on land, so nests are built close to a bank, often with a steep drop-off that allows the bird to approach the nest from underwater. The male selects the nest site and will define his territory through yodeling. In fact, common loons are famous for their eerie, beautiful calls during the breeding season. In addition to yodeling, they also make a wavering call (tremolo) when alarmed or to announce their presence at a lake. The wail is the haunting call that loons give back and forth to figure out each other's location. Hoots are soft, short calls given to keep in contact with each other.

Once paired, over the course of a week in May or early June, the male and female build the nest very near the water, on the shore or on a small island. The nest, a mound of grasses, twigs, and reeds, is partly hidden by surrounding vegetation, and is often reused from year to year. One of the loons will crawl on top of the mound and shape the interior to the contours of its body. The finished nest is about 22 inches wide and looks like a clump of dead grasses by the edge of the water. Common loons will also use man-made (artificial) floating nest-sites, which have been offered as alternative habitat on lakes with extensive shoreline development.

Life Cycle:

The female lays two eggs (1 brood per breeding season) and both parents will help incubate the eggs for a total of 26 to 29 days. The young leave the nest only a few days after hatching and can dive and swim underwater at two to three days of age. Chicks are covered in dark down. At this point, although they can swim, they usually spend some time riding on their parents' backs during the first couple of weeks. This may help the chicks keep warm and protect them from predators. For the first eight weeks or so, the

young loons are fed by their parents. The adults train their chicks to catch prey by dropping captured fish in front of them. Over the following weeks, they gradually learn to dive well enough to obtain their own food. By three months of age or sooner, they are able to fly and become independent of their parents. Common loons do not breed until they are 5 years old, and often not until 7 or older. They are thought to live up to 30 years.

Range:

During the breeding season, common loons can be found in the northern United States and Canada as well as in Greenland, Iceland, Norway, and even Scotland (although very rarely). This species winters over a much wider range in Europe and the British Isles as well as in North America. In North America, loons in western Canada and Alaska migrate to the Pacific coast, from Alaska's Aleutian Islands down past Mexico's Baja Peninsula. Loons from the Great Lakes region migrate to the Gulf of Mexico or Florida coasts. Loons from eastern Canada migrate to the Atlantic Coast. Peaks for the fall migration are from late August to late November. In the spring, peaks are from late April to early May. In winter, common loons can commonly be found on marine bays and inlets along the Washington coast. They can also be found on nearby fresh water, albeit less frequently. During migration, they are numerous on Puget Sound, Hood Canal, and Willapa Bay. They can also be found on large bodies of water in eastern Washington during migration, and in smaller numbers in winter. Common loons have nested recently on lakes and reservoirs in Ferry, Okanogan, Douglas, Chelan, Whatcom, and King Counties. Non-breeding adults can be found in the summer in the north Puget Sound area, on the outer coast, and on lakes and reservoirs of Central Washington.

Diet:

Their diet consists of mostly fish up to 10 inches long, particularly perch and sunfish in northern lakes. If fish are scarce or water is too murky for fishing, common loons will catch crustaceans, snails, leeches, frogs, and even aquatic insect larvae. In their wintering waters, these loons will eat smallish fish such as Atlantic croaker. Sometimes they band together in groups to chase schools of Gulf silversides. They may also occasionally eat aquatic plants.

Threats:

Since common loons require clear, unpolluted lakes, they can be especially sensitive to pollution and disturbances. Regional declines have occurred at the southern edge of their range. In the Midwest, loons have disappeared from breeding sites in Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, and Ohio, and are only found in northern areas of Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan. Their range has retracted in New England as well, though loon populations have rebounded there thanks to restoration efforts. Lead fishing sinkers, which loons ingest when they scoop up pebbles off the lake bottom to store in their gizzards, have been a significant cause of loon deaths from lead poisoning. Mercury from the burning of coal can build up in lakes through rainfall, and this has led to poor reproductive success for common loons in Canada, New England, and Wisconsin. They are often caught inadvertently by commercial fishing nets, both on the Great Lakes and in the ocean. Acid rain can acidify lakes, reducing fish populations that loons depend on. Human activity, particularly motorboats and jet skis, can disturb loons on breeding lakes. Common loons avoid densely populated areas, thus development of lakes and the resulting increase in boat traffic have resulted in a decrease in available habitat. Jet skis are a major disturbance to loons in

that they are fast, loud, and can maneuver in shallow areas where loons nest. Ocean oil spills can cause die-offs on loon wintering waters especially since loons dive rather than fly when they encounter oil slicks. Furthermore, delayed breeding in common loons can result in low productivity, making it harder for the population to rebound from declines. The decline of common loons continent-wide has aroused extensive public concern and action, and breeding conservation programs are in effect over much of their range.

Fun Facts:

- Biologists estimate that loon parents and their two chicks can eat about a half-ton of fish over a 15-week period.
- The common loon is the most widespread species of loon in North America and breeds the farthest south.
- The North American name “loon” likely comes from either the Old English word lumme, meaning lummo or awkward person, or the Scandinavian word lum meaning lame or clumsy. Either way, the name refers to the loon’s poor ability to walk on land.
- In prehistoric times, the loons had a more southerly distribution than today, and their fossils have been found in places such as California, Florida and Italy.
- California Native American myths have a recurring figure, Loon or Loon Woman, based on the common loon.
- The common loon is the provincial bird of Ontario and is depicted on the Canadian one-dollar coin, which has come to be known affectionately as the “loonie.”
- Loons can fly more than 75 miles per hour!
- Each male common loon has his own signature yodel. If a male moves to a different territory, he will change his yodel.

Sources:

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