

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

- Sigurd F. Olson

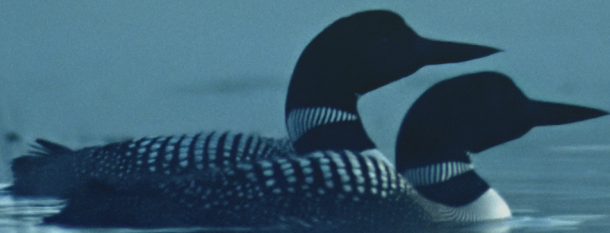
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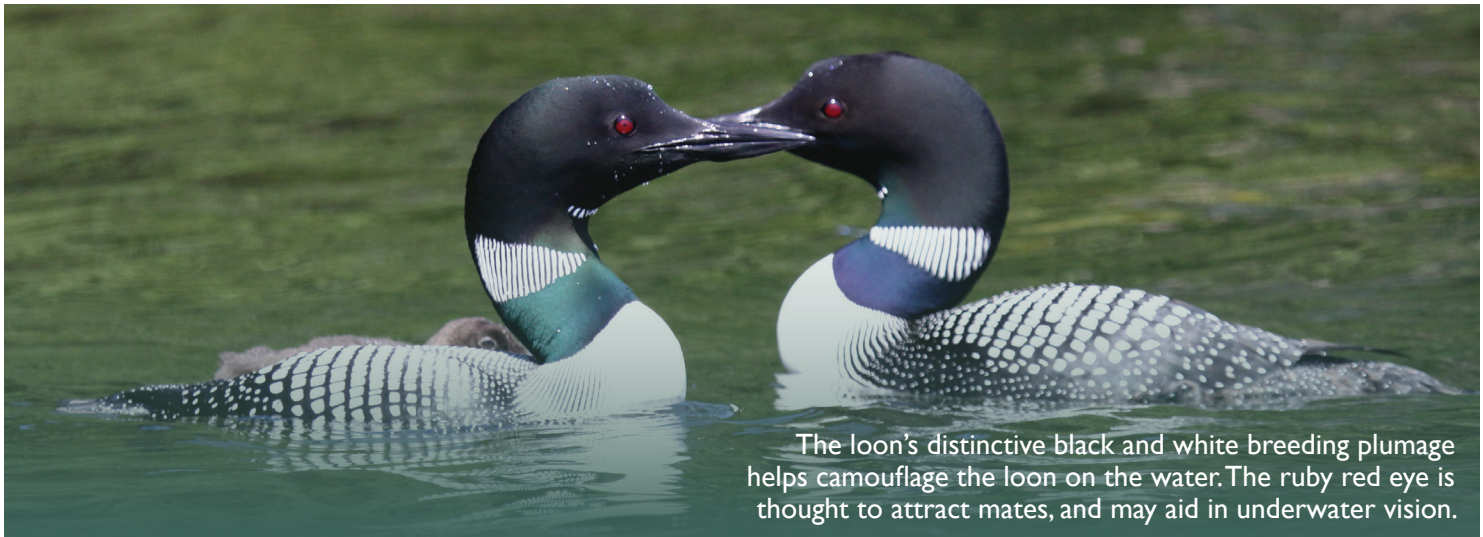
# Maine's Common Loon

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[maineaudubon.org/loons](http://maineaudubon.org/loons)





The loon's distinctive black and white breeding plumage helps camouflage the loon on the water. The ruby red eye is thought to attract mates, and may aid in underwater vision.

**C**ommon Loons hold a special place in the hearts and minds of all who see and hear them. Their striking plumage, soulful cries and ability to seemingly vanish under water have inspired legends of magic, mysticism, and creation for many centuries. Even today, few can hear the cry of a loon drift across a dusky lake without feeling a connection to an ancient and wild spirit.

There are five species of loons in the world, but only the Common Loon (*Gavia immer*) breeds in Maine. Common Loons are large birds, measuring about 32" from head to tail, with a wingspan of 46 inches. They are also heavy, weighing on average about nine pounds. Maine loons tend to be heavier than loons from other regions, and males are slightly larger than females. A male in peak breeding condition in Maine in the summer can weigh up to 14 pounds.

**Flight** Unlike most birds, loons have solid rather than hollow bones, making them heavy for their size. In flight, the loon's relatively small wings and tail give it a pointed and hump-backed appearance. The high ratio of body weight to wing size makes it difficult for loons to take flight and they must strenuously flap their wings while running across open water to become airborne. Once in flight, loons are powerful fliers and can reach speeds of more than 70 miles per hour.

**Diving** The solid bones that make flight difficult are a boon when it comes to diving. Loons are exceptional divers, and spend much of their time catching fish. Most feeding dives are relatively shallow and last about a minute. Loons may be able to dive to 200 feet but this is probably not that common.

Before a long dive, loons reduce their buoyancy by compressing feathers and exhaling to direct the flow of oxygen-rich blood to vital organs.

**Feeding** Loons have long, flexible necks and powerful feet that allow them to maneuver underwater with ease. They find their prey by sight, so water quality is very important. Loons eat fish almost exclusively, but they also forage on crustaceans and insects if they are stressed or if fish are not readily available. They usually eat fish less than eight inches long, although they may attempt to eat much larger fish. Loons prefer fish that are slower moving and easier to catch. However, they will eat whatever they can catch and generally eat whatever is most common in a lake. Adult loons will eat about two pounds of fish a day.

**Territories and Mating** Loons fly north following the ice melt, with males normally arriving on Maine's lakes the day of or the day after ice-out. Males arrive first, and start defending their territories from other males. Territories range in size from 20 to 200 acres, averaging about 100 acres. Territories need good nesting habitat as well as quiet areas where chicks are safe from waves, predators, and disturbance.

Females arrive on the breeding grounds a week or two later than males. Courting rituals begin almost immediately and include mutual bill dipping, side-by-side swimming, wing, and soft hoots. Contrary to popular folklore, loons do not mate for life. Pair bonds last on average about seven years; they may fail when a new loon challenges the resident or if one member of the pair doesn't return after the winter. Loons will battle to the death to defend their territories, but more often the weaker loon gives up the fight. The mate left behind typically stays on the territory.



Loons are sometimes mistaken for other diving birds such as cormorants, mergansers, and grebes. While they all float low in the water, the loon has a heavier profile and holds its straight, thick bill in a horizontal position.

# Threats to Loons and what you can do!

## Fishing Line and Lead Fishing Tackle

One of the leading causes of death for adult loons in Maine is lead poisoning from the ingestion of lead tackle. There is no cure for lead poisoning, and once a loon ingests a lead jig or sinker it dies within a few weeks.

## Boating Activity

Wakes from boats too close to shore can wash eggs out of lakeside nests. Loon parents might abandon nests in areas where boats linger nearby, and nests abandoned for even short periods leave eggs vulnerable to predators or heat exposure. Boats also pose a collision risk, and they can keep loons from feeding or separate adult loons from their chicks.

## Water Quality and Invasives

Loons need clean, clear water so they can see (and catch) their prey. Shoreline development, agricultural and lawn runoff, warmer temperatures, sewage, atmospheric pollution, and invasive aquatic plants all can affect the quality of loon habitat.

**Water Levels** Because loons build their nests close to the shoreline, rising water levels can flood nests and wash away eggs. If water levels drop, stranding nests too far above the water, loons lose their ability to slip on and off the nest undetected, increasing the likelihood of predation.

**Habitat Loss** Loons need quiet places that are hidden from predators and away from wind and waves to build their nests. Buildings, docks, and boat ramps on islands and shorelines near traditional nest sites can cause loons to abandon their nesting locations and reduce available habitat for new nests.

**Info:**  
[maineaudubon.org/loons](http://maineaudubon.org/loons)

## Anglers

- Use lead-free fishing sinkers and jigs. Maine law bans the sale and use of lead sinkers and lead-headed jigs less than an ounce in weight and measuring 2 1/2 inches or less. Recycle old lead tackle. Visit [fishleadfree.org](http://fishleadfree.org) for more information.
- Retrieve loose and broken fishing line and tackle from shorelines and open water.

## Boaters

- It is illegal to travel at 'no-wake' speeds within 300 feet of shore or islands and in waters less than 15 feet deep. Encourage fellow boaters to observe the no-wake zone. Boats operating wake-surfing equipment can voluntarily help loons by staying at least 500 feet offshore.
- Keep boat trailers free from aquatic plants when traveling, especially when coming from other states.

## Camp Owners

- Visit [mainelakessociety.org](http://mainelakessociety.org) to sign up for Lake Smart, and inquire about their Loon Smart program, which evaluates both campowner behavior and homesites for loon-friendly practices.
- Maintain buffers of vegetation along shorelines, and reduce the size of your lawn. Use phosphorous-free fertilizers.
- Avoid areas where loons nest and raise their young during the breeding season.
- Watch nesting loons and families from a distance that doesn't change their behavior or direction of travel. Back away if a loon is swimming away from you or has its head down over its nest.

## Everyone

- Join the Maine Loon Count to help track adult loons and their chicks over time.
- Host a presentation about loons and loon habitat in your community. Look up the *Look Out for Loons* program for outreach materials and presentation resources.
- Post "Look Out For Loons!" signs (with landowner permission) at marinas and boat launches to let lake users know loons are nearby. *Note: these signs can no longer be posted at state-managed public boat launches.*
- Use binoculars to watch loons. Do not approach nests or loons on the water too closely, especially if the loons are calling or displaying.



**Nesting** Because loons are heavy and their legs are located at the very back of their body, they move awkwardly on land. They typically build their nests within a foot of the water's edge so they can slip quickly on and off without being noticed. Males and females work together to make nests of mud and vegetation. Females usually lay two mottled brown eggs between mid-May and mid-June. Both parents incubate the eggs for about 37 days. Loons are long-lived, and the oldest known nesting loon is over 30 years old.

**Chicks** Chicks can swim right after hatching, and the loon family then leaves the nest for a nearby nursery area. The downy chicks often ride on the backs of the parents to rest, keep warm, and avoid predators. After only a week, the chicks can dive short distances and catch some of their own food, although they rely on their parents to feed them minnows and small fish. Mortality for loon chicks is high, with an average of one in four chicks surviving through the summer. Young birds stay with their parents as long as they can, ideally for at least ten to twelve weeks, when they are able to fly and fish for themselves.

**Migration** As the days shorten in late August, adult loons start to gather in large flocks. Parents will abandon young chicks that have hatched late in the season, leaving them to fend for themselves. Groups of adults feed together in large rafts for a month or more before heading to the ocean for the winter. Juveniles will start to flock together later in the fall, sometimes waiting until just before the fall freeze-up to fly to the ocean. In the spring, breeding loons generally return to the same lake and often to the same territories they've used before, near the lake where they were raised. Young birds will remain



In the fall, adults lose their summer finery and molt into a dull gray, brown and white winter plumage. Juveniles look very similar to adults in winter, and will keep this drab plumage through their second winter.

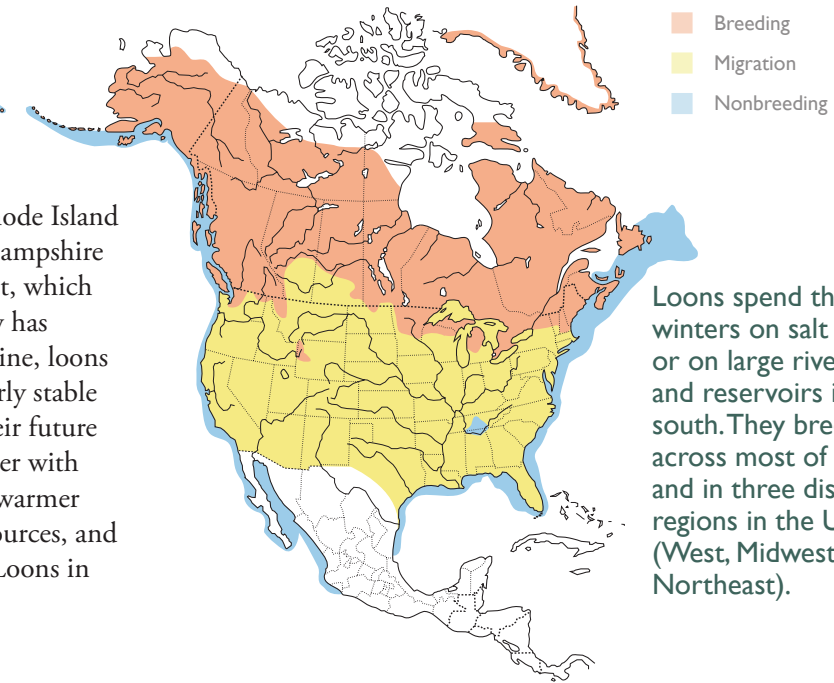
## A Loon's Many Voices

One of the most fascinating things about loons is their rich, haunting call. Loons are most vocal from mid-May to mid-June. They have four distinct calls they use to communicate with their families and with other loons.



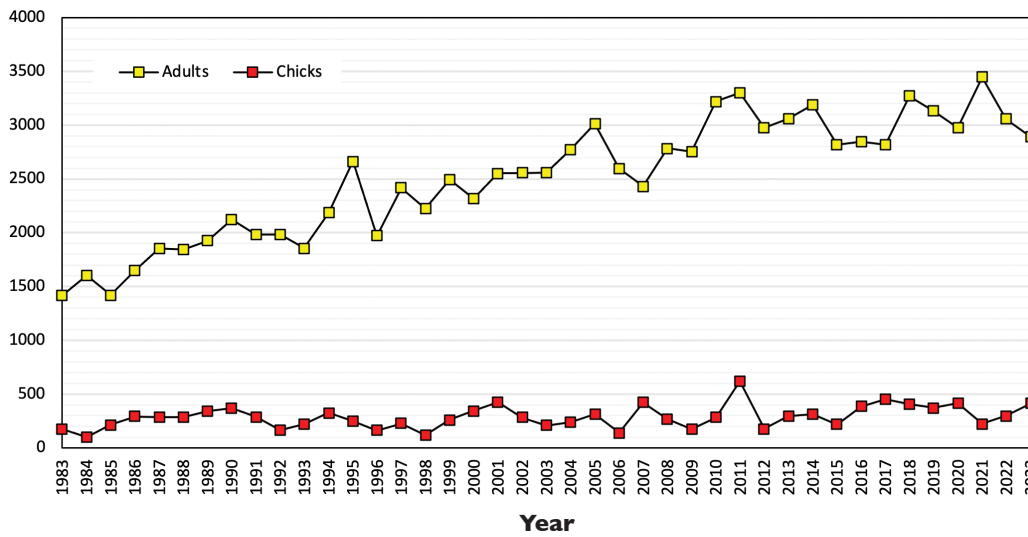
on the ocean for several years before migrating inland to freshwater lakes. A young loon normally won't secure a breeding territory or look for a mate until it is 6-7 years old.

**Population Status** Loons historically nested in Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and Rhode Island but were extirpated in the last century. New Hampshire has about 700 adult Common Loons. Vermont, which nearly lost its loon population in the '80s, now has 300-500 adults in the summer months. In Maine, loons are found statewide and their population is fairly stable between 2,800 and 3,500 adults. However, their future in Maine is at risk. Loons need clean, cold water with healthy fish populations. Climate change and warmer water will likely change lake dynamics, food sources, and habitat in ways that do not benefit Common Loons in Maine.



Loons spend their winters on salt water or on large rivers and reservoirs in the south. They breed across most of Canada, and in three distinct regions in the U.S. (West, Midwest, and Northeast).

**Estimated Loon Population in Southern Half of Maine (1983-2023)**



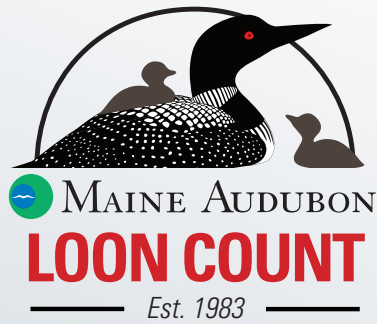
An estimate of the loon population in the southern half of Maine is calculated each year from the Maine Loon Count, a statewide survey by more than 1,500 citizen scientists. The estimate for adults has grown steadily since the survey was established in 1984. Chick estimates vary from year-to-year but have not changed markedly since the late 1980s.

**The Tremolo** Also known as the “crazy laugh”, the tremolo is used to signal alarm from a threat, and sometimes at night to vocally advertise and defend territories. Flying loons sometimes make a modified version of the tremolo.

**The Wail** Sounding much like a wolf’s howl, the wail is used frequently during social interactions between loons, and may be used to regain contact with a mate during night chorusing and when answering other loon calls.

**The Yodel** Given only by males, the yodel is a long, rising call with repetitive notes that can last up to six seconds. It is used to defend a territory and might be heard when another male enters a loon’s territory. Yodels are distinct for each loon so can be used to identify individuals.

**The Hoot** This quiet one-note call is used by family members to locate each other to check on their well-being.



The Maine Loon Project started in 1977 to assess the status and future of Maine's loon population. Activities of the Maine Loon Project include managing the annual Maine Loon Count, conducting activities to restore the population through the Maine Loon Restoration Project and outreach around loon and lake issues, and advocating in the state legislature for regulations and public policies affecting Maine's loons (such as mercury emissions, lead-free fishing tackle, invasive plants, and shoreland zoning).

The Project also manages the *fishleadfree.org* website, and the *Common Loons in the Classroom* curriculum for grades K-5. For more information, to make a donation, or to sign up for programs and outreach activities, visit [maineaudubon.org/loons](http://maineaudubon.org/loons) or email [conserve@maineaudubon.org](mailto:conserve@maineaudubon.org).



Since 1843, Maine Audubon has worked to conserve Maine's wildlife and wildlife habitat by engaging people in education, conservation, and action. The oldest and largest Maine-based conservation organization, Maine Audubon has eight public centers and sanctuaries across the state, seven chapters, and 30,000 members, volunteers, and supporters, and connects with more than 250,000 people annually.

