

Musings of a Loon

I am a Loon

They call me a common loon, but from my standpoint my life is anything but common. "Mysterious" might be a more accurate description. It is March. Four months foraging for fish and insects in the Gulf of Mexico, I am feeling restless, more than ready to return to my summer habitat in northern Wisconsin. My drab winter gray-colored plumage has molted and I feel refreshed with my tuxedo of black and white feathers. Time for me to head northward. I hope that when I reach my summer abode the ice has melted; I don't want a repeat of 2008 when I accidentally landed on a sheet of ice!

I arrive at my summer home in late April; they say the ice went out only a few days ago. Famished and tired, I feed on fish, insects, larvae, whatever I can find. The females will be arriving in a few days, so I will do some scouting and claim my nesting territory before they get here. I am relieved that no other males have the audacity to try to intrude into my territory. If they did, I would intensely resist the challenge. Returning to the quiet shoreline of Three-in-One Island, I locate the inviting low shoreline. We must nest close to the water because my strong swimming legs are so far back on my body that it is nearly impossible to navigate on dry land. I prefer natural shorelines, others prefer the artificial nesting platforms anchored in the shallows by humans. I hear some familiar calls; the females have arrived at the north woods lake. My long time mate has returned! Nest preparation, feeding and mating will keep us occupied until our two spotted brownish eggs, about the size of turkey eggs, are laid in our nest of mud, grass and moss.

We keep an eye out for predators, eagles, raccoons, turtles, and fend them off with our eerie and alarming tremolo call. We like our privacy and isolation during nesting; we don't mind the curiosity of human beings, but greatly appreciate them keeping their distance from our nest. Thankfully, high water did not drive us from our nest this year like it did in 2018. Finally, two speckled eggs are laid! We take turns incubating the eggs, giving our mate opportunity to feed. In 28 days, we hope the eggs have hatched and two dark gray chicks have appeared to become our "clutch."

Our chicks scurry into the water after a day or two, staying close to mom and dad. We dive to find worms, small fish and larvae to feed our clutch. We carry them on our back, to give them rest and protection. Within a few days, they are making short dives. We make sure they stay very close and we watch for predators and fast moving watercraft. Our chicks eat voraciously as they must be ready to migrate to the Gulf of Mexico in early November.

Some of our loon friends sadly did not find a mate this year. We call them loners. That is not a particularly correct name as they do socialize with other loners, and even are part of the "coffee clutch" that gathers daily, usually in the evening, to socialize and feed as a group. They talk to each other via a gentle "hoot." If you hear our mournful-sounding "wailing" call, one of us is trying to locate a friend or mate. When an eagle flies overhead, or when other danger is nearby, our "tremolo" call alerts other loons of nearby danger. At night, our eerie calls may be unsettling to unfamiliar humans, but many find our calls interesting and a soothing sound of the northwoods.

Eight weeks after hatching, our clutch has grown to be very independent. Their dark fuzz has been replaced by grayish feathers and they spend most of their time away from mom and dad. In fact, we see little of them as they are out fishing and feeding, gaining strength and weight for the November flight south. The fully dependent chicks have transformed to independent fledglings in a matter of 8 weeks!

Our kind of birds love clear water; it makes fishing easy. We are strong swimmers. We can easily dive for about a minute at a time looking for food. Some of our relatives dive 100 feet deep looking for food, but around here we find plenty of nourishment in a few feet of water. Some estimate that we eat nearly 1,500 pounds of fish in a year...that is a lot of fish!

In October, you will see us starting to gather on local staging lakes, preparing for the long flight to our winter home on the Gulf of Mexico. We adults typically leave earlier than our offspring since they need a little more time to gain strength for the flight. When fully grown, we reach a weight up to about 15 pounds and have a wingspan of 48 to 60 inches. Our life expectancy is 15 to 30 years.

In contrast to our northern home where we are a striking black and white, in the Gulf we have an unremarkable drab gray winter color and do little calling. Throughout the winter in the warm water of the Gulf of Mexico, I feel a longing for beautiful, cool and wild northern Wisconsin lakes.

Jim Bakken
