

August 2023
Loon Rescue on Upper Eau Claire Lake
Jim Bakken (Upper Eau Claire Lake)

"To look a dying loon in the eye and know his death is truly preventable."

Linda Grenzer, 8/5/2023, Loon Rescue Incorporated

A loon rescue was the furthest thing from my mind. It was a Friday evening, 8 PM, August 4, 2023, and after a long, hot summer day, my wife and I had just started watching a movie at our home when my phone pinged. It was a text from Craig Willert; he was at his home on Upper Eau Claire Lake. He sent a photo of an adult loon that was acting out of character and Craig was asking if there might be something wrong with the bird. The loon was acting very lethargic, moving slowly near the shoreline and even at times turning its head towards its tail and laying its head on its back as if it was sleeping. Clearly something was wrong, and this loon needed help.



I had heard of a nonprofit organization that specialized in loon rescue. I quickly searched the web and found phone numbers for Kevin and Linda Grenzer at **Loon Rescue Incorporated**, located in Tomahawk, Wisconsin. Their Facebook page stated they were open 24 hours, so I called them for advice and guidance. Linda Grenzer answered the phone, and I described what Craig had related to me. Her initial assessment was **possible lead poisoning** and she asked if we could capture the loon. With darkness closing in, we decided to attempt to locate the loon at daybreak, capture it if we were able to, and meet the Grenzers at a halfway point between Barnes and Tomahawk.



I left home and headed north, a 2-hour drive to our cabin on Upper Eau Claire Lake. At daybreak, Craig and I did a quick search from land to see if we could find the sick loon. Not finding it from shore, we launched Craig's boat and started to search northward, the direction the loon was headed the previous evening. Not finding it, we turned to the south, hoping to locate the sick loon. A quarter mile south, Craig spotted a dark figure ahead. It was the loon, motionless as if it was sleeping. As we approached, it lifted its head and started to slowly swim away.



Neither of us had captured a loon before but with some trepidation we were able to net the bird. Unexpectedly, the lethargic loon didn't put up much of a fight. We retrieved it from the net and gently placed it into a large Rubbermaid container we had prepared in advance, with padding and cushioning as suggested by Linda, to keep the loon comfortable during transport. At this point Craig and I were quite proud of our success and did a quick high-five. Little did we know that our feeling of success would be replaced by sadness later that morning.

It was Saturday, August 5 at 6:51 AM when I called Linda to inform her that we had captured the loon. Linda asked if we would meet them halfway, as they would be driving from Tomahawk. "Yes, certainly," was our answer, "just let us know what road you will be traveling on." Craig and I returned to shore, loaded the loon and container into the truck, and headed to Highway 70, where we would meet the Grenzers. It was 8:30 AM when we met the Grenzers on highway 70 at Draper to make the transfer. The Grenzers, transferring the loon to their travel container, observed that the loon was very ill. They couldn't say if the bird would survive or not, but they would transfer it to **Raptor Education Group Incorporated (REGI)** in Antigo for treatment. We exchanged contact information and the Grenzers were off to Tomahawk with the sick loon.



I had just pulled into Craig's driveway when the phone rang. It was Linda. She had sad news; the loon had succumbed due to the severity of the illness during transport. Hit by the loon's sudden roller-coaster, we contemplated the sad news and rationalized that we had made a good effort and nothing short of a miracle would have saved the loon at that point. We had witnessed the lethal and toxic effect of lead poisoning.

As the Grenzers stated in their Facebook post: "This loon has the classic signs of lead poisoning. He was extremely weak, lethargic, anemic, very thin... A high percentage of loons die yearly due to ingesting a single lead sinker or jig. Lead toxicity is a very slow and painful death that will kill a healthy loon in 2 weeks after ingesting lead." "There are many alternatives to use such as steel, tin, tungsten, bismuth, and ceramic. These lead-free alternatives are safe and effective to use while fishing."

You may be wondering, "What can be done to prevent lead-poisoning in loons?"

The 2023 Spring Hearing of the **Wisconsin Conservation Congress** included a question on lead fishing tackle. The following context was provided for the question: "All anglers have experienced lines breaking, fish getting away and losing lures. Lost tackle has a direct impact on populations of loons, swans, eagles, and osprey. In the last 27 years, Northern Wisconsin's Common Loon population has decreased by 22%. A surveillance program examining lead toxicity as a factor in mortality of Common Loons in Wisconsin found that approximately 30% of the dead loons submitted for necropsy were lead poisoned. It's important to look at this as a preventable issue. Limiting the amount of small lead sinkers and jigs would help reduce stress on breeding loons and increase the health of the ecosystem. Many alternatives to lead tackle are available, including tungsten, tin, iron, and others. The cost of replacing small lead jigs and split sinkers would be nominal for most anglers." **The responses to Question #54 indicate strong public support for a statewide ban on lead jigs and sinkers weighing 1 oz or less.**

2023 DNR WI Conservation Congress Hearings

Question 54. Do you support the WCC working with the DNR, the Natural Resources Board and our state legislature to implement a statewide ban on lead jigs and sinkers weighing 1oz or less?

ALL PARTICIPANTS:

Yes - 4,727

No - 2,960

No Opinion - 2,172

WISCONSIN RESIDENTS:

Yes - 4,431

No - 2,868

No Opinion - 1,959

Source: <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/about/wcc/springhearing>

If you fish, do your part to protect loons by following the advice of the experts at **LoonWatch** – abandon the use of lead fishing tackle, dispose of it properly, and adopt safe alternatives. If you don't fish, you can make a difference by speaking with friends and family about safe alternatives to lead fishing tackle and by keeping an eye out for loons who need help. Everyone can help loons by contacting **state legislators** and members of the **Wisconsin Natural Resources Board**. Let them know you support a statewide ban on lead jigs and sinkers weighing 1 oz or less to prevent these painful deaths.

Six states within the breeding range of the Common Loon have restrictions on lead fishing tackle: New Hampshire, New York, Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont and Washington. Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin have no restrictions on the use of lead fishing tackle.

One final reflection to close what has been an emotional experience for me and for Craig, on Sunday evening, August 6, a rare summer gathering of 12 loons was observed on Upper Eau Claire Lake. Could it have been a memorial service? I'd like to think so.

Jim Bakken
President, Friends of the Eau Claire Lakes Area