



## Did You Know? "Last Call"

Lee Wiesner (Middle Eau Claire Lake)

In June 2021, we were filled with joy to see a loon chick in the south bay of Middle Eau Claire Lake while on an evening boat ride. As a [Loon Ranger](#), it is my responsibility to monitor the loons on the lake, specifically the loon chicks. The weekly monitoring (almost daily monitoring when the grandchildren were with us), continued into late October with no loon sightings after that.

The adult loons on the lake appeared to have left and the chick was nowhere to be found. Our assumption was that the parents had left earlier in the fall and that the chick had left a brief time later or did not make it. During the first week of November, I decided to take my fishing boat out to circle the lake one last time, searching for any sign of the loon chick. As I rounded the last point before the landing, there it was, the lost chick. I assumed it was the young one we'd been watching as all the other loons had left, but I couldn't be sure as all loons have dull gray and white plumage at this time of year.

By contrast, when loons return to northern Wisconsin lakes in April, both male and female adult loons are in their striking black-and-white checkered breeding plumage. The adult male loon arrives first, back to the same lake where the pair nested the year before, searching for and selecting a nest site. The female loon shows up a couple of days to a week or two later. Loons usually mate for life which can be up to 20 to 25 years. Sometimes an intruder will show up and displace one of the loons from their territory and a new nesting pair is formed. If one loon dies, its partner will seek out a new mate. Nest building by both male and female is soon followed by an incubation period of 24 to 31 days which is shared by both parents.



**Loon Adult and Chick, Upper Eau Claire Lake, June 26, 2022**

The young usually leave the nest 1 or 2 days after hatching with the larger, more dominant chick receiving the most attention and food from the parents. The young are usually capable of flight at 10 to 11 weeks of age. At about 12 weeks of age the chick or chicks are left to fend for themselves. Loons do not migrate together and the parents head south prior to the chicks. Wisconsin's loons winter along the southern Atlantic coast or in the Gulf. In their third-year young loons return north, usually to an area within 30 miles of where they were hatched. Young adults usually start breeding when they are 6 years old.



**Loon Adult and Same Chick, Upper Eau Claire Lake, Sept. 5, 2022**

In the weeks following my early November sighting of the lone loon, and with my boats out for the season, all I could do was listen for any loon calls from shore. I heard none, so I elected to believe that the chick had made it off the lake and was sunbathing in the gulf.

On November 25th as I was walking toward my truck, I heard a mournful lone loon call somewhere out in front of our house. I walked down to the shoreline and was surprised to see that the lake had opened in several spots due to the high winds and unseasonably warm temperatures. I scanned the lake and did not see any sign of the loon chick.

The next morning, I went down to the shoreline to scan the lake. I quickly observed three large, dark spots on the ice in the middle of the lake. After taking a better look with binoculars, the three dark spots turned out to be two mature bald eagles and one immature eagle. The eagles would take turns flying up and then hovering over something floating in the open water. That something was a loon. To my amazement, there were also two otters in the open water close to the loon and eagles. When the eagles took flight and flew towards the loon, the loon would dive, and so would the two otters. I watched this repeatedly for about an hour and then had to leave so I called Howard and Jack, two neighbors on the lake, to ask them if they would be willing to keep an eye on the situation. I also called Linda Grenzer, from the volunteer loon rescue team, to see if they could save the loon as they have a hovercraft and another boat for loon rescues on the ice. Unfortunately, she told me that the open water cannot be larger than ten feet by ten feet to capture the loon with a net. Her advice was to monitor the situation and let them know if the loon was still living when the open water was small enough for them to capture the loon.

The next day, I went down to the lake shore and again observed the three eagles, two otters and the loon. The open water area was now much smaller, but still too large to attempt a loon capture. For about an hour, I watched the same show as the day before and again had to leave.

The following morning, I went down to the lake and saw nothing but ice. No eagles or otters. No loon. I called Howard and Jack to see if they had observed either the otter or eagle with the loon. All they saw was the same fight for life that I had observed. I also followed up with Linda from the rescue team and advised her that our monitoring of the loon had ended, and I feared the worst.

We will never know if this lone loon was the chick raised on Middle Eau Claire Lake, a loon suffering from lead poisoning, tangled in fishing line, injured, or too old to make the trip south.

If you ever observe a loon in late fall surrounded by ice and in a small area of open water, or you hear a loon calling shortly after ice over, the loon may need help. Don't hesitate to call **Linda and Kevin Grenzer of Loon Rescue**. They can be reached at **(715) 966-5415 or (715) 453-4916**. Videos of their loon rescues can be seen on the [Loon Rescue Facebook group](#).

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