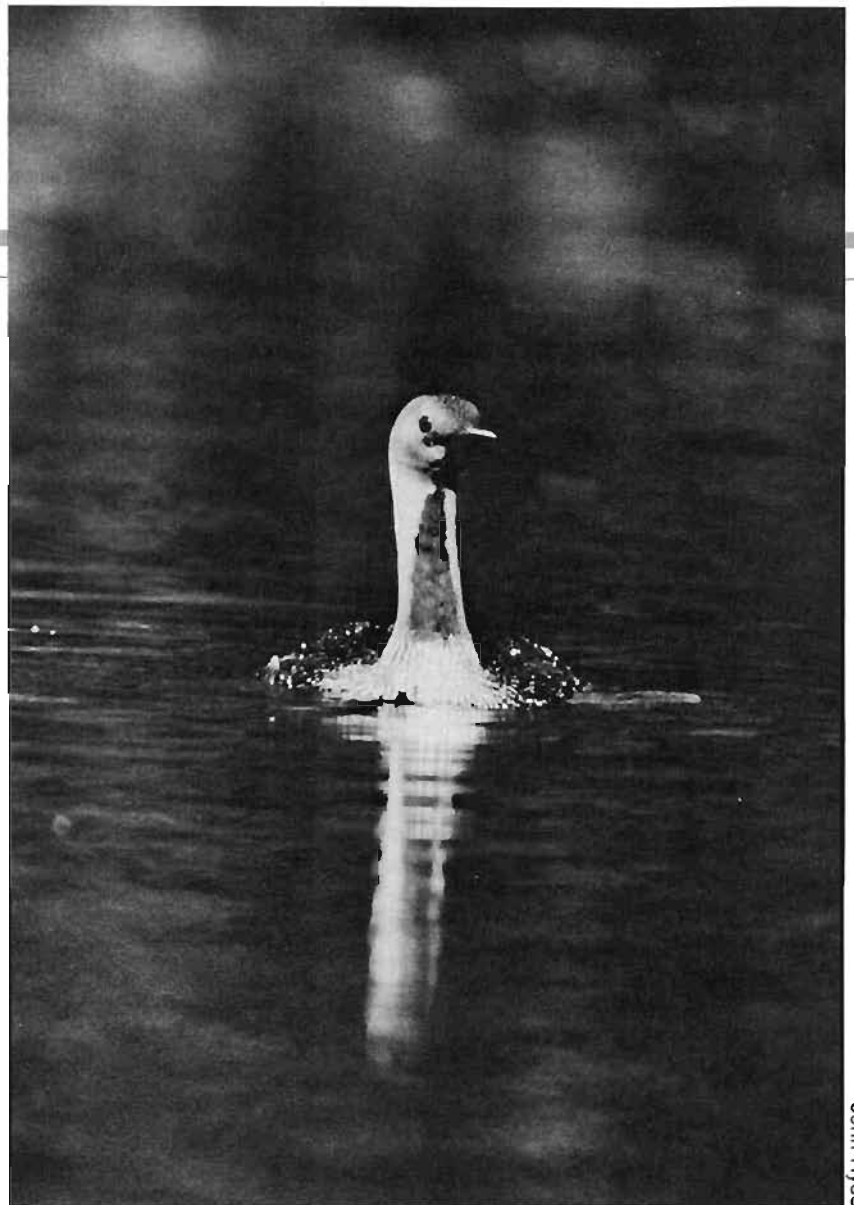


W LOON WATCH

by Nancy Tankersley



John Hyde

Loons are among the most popular birds in North America because of their large size, beauty, haunting vocalizations, and association with wilderness lakes. Unfortunately, the distribution of nesting loons in North America has receded as human populations have expanded in loon nesting areas. The Common Loon has disappeared as a breeding species in six states (Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa and California), and large declines due to human development and disturbance have been documented for New York and New Hampshire. ADF&G hopes to avoid this fate in developed areas in our state.

In Alaska, we are fortunate to have all five species of loons found in the world (see sidebar), including healthy populations of Common Loons in forested regions. However, human population growth in Anchorage and the nearby Matanuska-Susitna (Mat-Su) Valley has substantially increased development and disturbance on area lakes, and this has led to concern about the future of loons in these areas.

To study the distribution and nesting success of loons on Anchorage lakes, ADF&G began surveys in 1985. In 1986, the survey was expanded to part of the Mat-Su Valley, with the help of more than 100 volunteer observers. In 1987, the "Loon Watch," as it is now known, collected information from nearly 200 lakes, with the aid of 134 volunteer observers.

What we have learned is that there are still a few breeding loon pairs in the greater Anchorage area, the only city its size (230,000 people) in North America to have that distinction. Of the 41 lakes surveyed around Anchorage, only nine have hosted breeding loons since 1985. Breeding Pacific Loons have occurred on seven or fewer lakes each year for the last three years, while only two breeding pairs of Common Loons have been recorded. Although the average number of chicks surviving each year has been about normal (one chick per two breeding pairs), the extremely low numbers of breeding pairs, and the number of apparently suitable lakes not used by breeding loons (including two abandoned since 1982), are causes for concern



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about the future of these breeding populations in Anchorage.

Lakes along the road system between Sutton and Willow have been the main study lakes in the Mat-Su Valley. Both Common and Pacific Loons also breed in this area, although the Common is about three times more abundant than the Pacific Loon. The density of breeding loons is greater than in Anchorage, with 54 percent of the 158 lakes surveyed in 1987 hosting breeding pairs. As in Anchorage, the number of chicks surviving per pair is near or above normal ranges, but the number of apparently suitable lakes not used by breeding loons, including three known to be recently abandoned by breeding loons, is a cause for concern.

Human disturbance and shoreline development are probably having an impact on these loon populations. Because loons must nest on the shoreline immediately adjacent to open water, they are vulnerable to unintentional human disturbance and nest destruction, as well as deliberate vandalism. Human activities, such as fishing near a nest, can cause incubating loons to leave their nest, exposing their eggs to the cold, or to predators such as ravens, gulls and eagles. Dogs and other household pets probably also represent a threat to loons. Boat and floatplane wakes can destroy their sedge and grass nests, or wash eggs away. We have had reports of these disturbances to several nesting pairs in the Mat-Su Valley in the last two years.

In order to reduce human disturbance, volunteers have helped

construct and place signs near public access points and loon nest areas on several busy lakes during the past two summers. On two heavily used recreational lakes in Anchorage where no loon chicks survived in 1986, fishing has also been restricted near the areas for the last two years. On five of the six lakes with signs placed near the nest sites in 1987, chicks were successfully fledged, including two lakes in the Mat-Su Valley that had not had chicks for four or five years.

Disturbance is not the only reason that some lakes are not used by breeding loons, however. Our surveys have shown that some busy recreational lakes have successfully nesting loons, while some quiet secluded lakes do not. Studies are underway to investigate any habitat differences between lakes used and not used by loons, so that future management efforts can be implemented only at appropriate lakes.

ADF&G would like to thank all the concerned volunteers in the Loon Watch program, and the lake users who heed the signs to avoid disturbing nesting loons. Loons are a valuable ecological and aesthetic resource that even Alaska's city folks can enjoy, by taking a little care.

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Alaska Fish & Game

September—October 1988

\$2.00

