



All photos by John Hyde

LOONS IN ALASKA

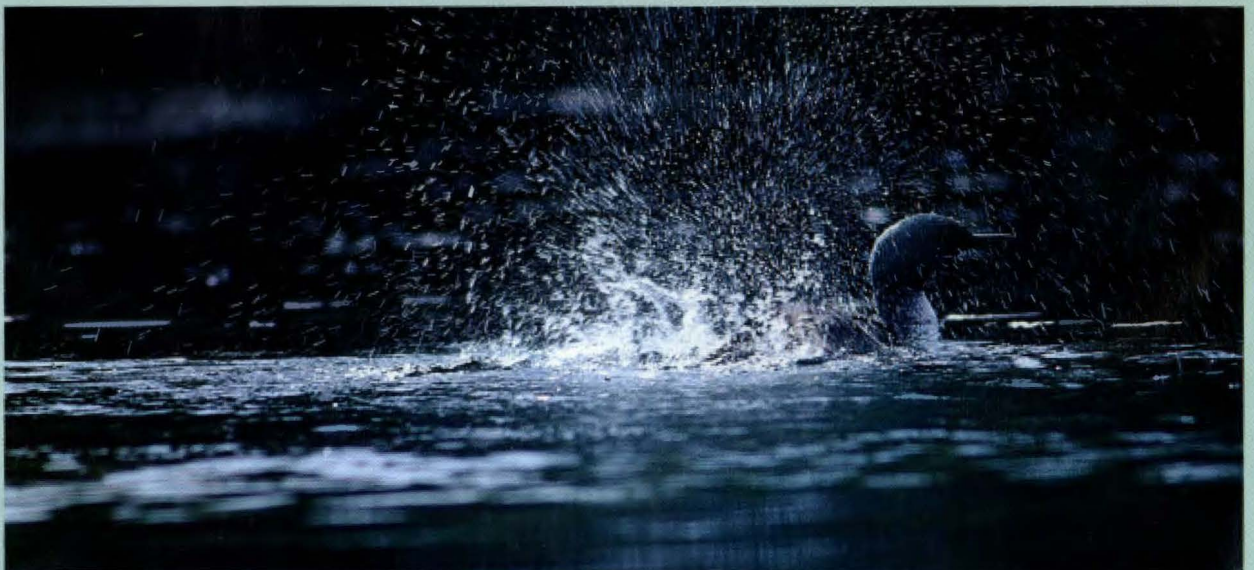
by Tom Paul and Nancy Tankersley

Loons are known as "spirits of the wilderness" and it is fitting that Alaska has all five species of loons found in the world. Loons are an integral part of Alaska's wilderness—a living symbol of Alaska's clean air, clean water, and high level of environmental quality. Loons, especially the Common Loon, are most famous for their call. The cry of a loon piercing the summer twilight is one of the most thrilling sounds in nature. The sight or sound of one of these birds in Alaskan waters gives a special meaning to many, as if it certified the surroundings as a truly "wild" place.

Description: Loons have stout bodies, long necks, pointed bills, and three-toed webbed feet, and spend most of their time afloat. Loons are sometimes confused with cormorants, mergansers, or other diving water birds.

The five species of loons found in Alaska are the Common, Yellow-billed, Red-throated, Pacific, and Arctic. Common Loons (*Gavia immer*) have deep black or dark green heads and necks and dark backs with an intricate pattern of black and white stripes, spots, squares, and rectangles. The Yellow-billed Loon (*Gavia adamsii*) is similar, with larger white spots on its back and a brilliant yellow bill even in winter. The Yellow-billed is the largest North American diving bird, 30-36" long, slightly larger than the Common.

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Red-throated Loons (*Gavia stellata*), Pacific Loons (*Gavia pacifica*), and Arctic Loons (*Gavia arctica*) are smaller varieties, a little over 2 feet long, and are readily distinguished from their larger cousins by gray rather than black heads. As its name implies, the Red-throat has a triangular throat patch of vivid, rusty red. It has a thin, upturned bill and vertical white stripes on the back of its head and neck. Its back is thickly speckled with white. The throat of the Pacific Loon is purplish black while its black back has bars and spots of white, similar to the Common and Yellow-billed. Arctic Loons are mostly Siberian breeders and are only found in extreme western Alaska (Cape Prince of Wales).

Males and females are marked the same. In winter, all loons fade to dark brown on top with white undersides, but the species can be distinguished by markings, bill shape and color.

Range: Common Loons spend the summer on lakes all over the state, except in very northern and western Alaskan tundra where the Yellow-billed nests. Commons winter along the southern coast from the Aleutian Islands south to Baja California. Yellow-billeds winter along southcoastal and southeastern waters. Occasionally, you can see them off Homer Spit or around the Cordova boat harbor, and some congregate in the northern portion of southeastern Alaska. Pacific Loons have a wide summer distribution around the state and are the most common wintering loon on southcentral and southeastern coasts. The Red-throated Loon breeds in coastal ponds and marshes around the state and spends the winter along the Pacific coast from the Aleutian Islands to Baja.

Life History: Adult loons leave younger birds at the coast and arrive at their freshwater nesting grounds by late May. Loon pairs are mated for life and return every year to the same area to breed. The nests are typically right at the shoreline on islands or points of land. They are made of debris or rotting vegetation formed into a simple mound. Two drab-colored eggs are laid in late May or June. The parents take turns incubating them for about a month. The young are precocious and leave the nest within a day or two, then ride on their parents' backs more than half the time in their first week of life. This helps keep their soft downy feathers dry and warm. Loon chicks grow slowly and must be fed by their parents. Sometime in the third month the chicks learn to fly.

Usually only one young of a pair survives to migrate to coastal waters in September or early October. Loons have difficulty hatching eggs and raising chicks on some lakes because of heavy predation from gulls, jaegers, and foxes, or disturbance from floatplanes, boats, or fishermen that force them to leave their nest. On busy recreational lakes, motor wakes sometimes drown chicks. Loons occasionally get tangled in discarded fishing line or plastic six-pack holders, which doom them to slow starvation.

During fall migration, some loons may congregate on large inland lakes before flying to coastal wintering areas. The young mature in two years, spending their second summer on the coast, rather than the freshwater lakes and ponds preferred by mature nesting pairs.

Behavior and Feeding: Perhaps the best diving birds, loons can stay underwater more than a minute and have been found caught in fish nets 240 feet deep. Loons feed on small fish but are also known to eat aquatic vegetation, insects, mollusks, and frogs. When alarmed, loons prefer diving for safety to flying. The larger loons need long take-off runs (up to one-quarter mile) to get airborne but once aloft are strong flyers, clocked as fast as 60 mph. Landing, they slide in on their breasts instead of feet first. They do not walk well on land because their feet are set so far back on their bodies.

The cry of the loon differs between species. On the summer nesting grounds the Common and Yellow-billed break into what sounds like yodeling or insane laughter. This "laughter" precipitated the expression "crazy as a loon." At night the cry becomes a more subdued "ah-oo-oo." The Red-throat erupts into a rapid quacking, and the Pacific has a wailing siren of a voice, an ascending whistle that it shortens to a piercing scream when startled. Loons can be heard day and night in summer when they perform their breeding displays but they are generally quiet in winter.

You Can Help Loons

1. Join our lake survey in Anchorage or Mat-Su Valley.
2. Do not disturb nesting loons or loons accompanied by chicks. Stay at least 100 yards away from loons during the June-July nesting season.
3. When you approach a loon, if it rises up out of the water and runs and splashes across the surface (a display called the "penguin dance"), you are too close. Leave the area. The penguin dance indicates severe stress from your presence and that the loon is trying to distract you from its nest or young.
4. Pick up discarded fishing line and plastic 6-pack holders around lakes. Cut into small pieces and dispose properly. This kind of litter can be fatal to loons and other wetland wildlife.
5. If you see someone injure or kill a loon or molest a nest or eggs, report them immediately to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Law Enforcement Division. Include the date, time, boat registration number, and a description of occupants in your report.
6. If you are interested in purchasing books, records, or gifts to benefit loons, contact:
North American Loon Fund
Humiston Building
Main Street
Meridith, NH 03253

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