

Yellow-billed Loon ESA Listing Determination Questions & Answers

1. Why was the Yellow-billed loon being considered for being listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act?

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) received a petition in 2004 from the Center for Biological Diversity to list the yellow-billed loon; starting a process for the agency to determine whether the species is warranted or not warranted for listing.

2. Why did the Service make a “warranted, but precluded” finding in 2009?

The yellow-billed loon became a candidate in 2009 based largely on alarming reports of high harvest received late in the petition evaluation process from the Bering Straits Region, primarily on St. Lawrence Island. Because of that data, the Service concluded that listing was warranted, but precluded by other listing priorities, but has since spent considerable time working with Alaska Department of Fish & Game, and Alaska Native peoples collecting better harvest information from the two communities on St. Lawrence Island.

3. What was the process for the new determination in 2014 that the yellow-billed loon is “not warranted” for listing?

Over the last several years, the Service conducted additional work to provide background for the finding. In 2011 and 2012, fall migration counts, subsistence harvest surveys, ethnographic research, and outreach activities were conducted on St. Lawrence Island to address conservation concerns and inconsistencies in harvest estimates. In addition, we held internal meetings to identify information and analysis needs. Subsequent work funded by the Service included population modeling and genetics studies.

A team of biologists and managers worked to synthesize and review available information on status and potential threats facing the yellow-billed loon. The team completed the most comprehensive evaluation of the species to date. That evaluation, plus recent field studies, resulted in new information about the yellow-billed loon. Expert biologists on yellow-billed loons and similar species peer reviewed the Species Status Assessment Report before it was finalized.

4. Why does the not-warranted finding differ from the previous finding that the species was warranted for listing but precluded by other national listing priorities?

There are two primary reasons that listing of the yellow-billed loon was recently determined to be not “not warranted” in contrast to the earlier “warranted but precluded” determination.

First, subsequent to the 2009 finding, the Service and its partners expanded efforts to better understand yellow-billed loon harvest, abundance, and distribution in the Bering Strait-Norton Sound region with the goal of evaluating the reliability of reported harvest. Harvest survey data are subject to numerous, unquantifiable biases; however, based on new information collected in 2010-2013, which included local and traditional ecological knowledge and ethnographic

information, the Service has reliable information suggesting the yellow-billed loon is not a significant subsistence resource. Only a small proportion of the total range-wide population is harvested annually; harvest practices or use of loons have not changed significantly, nor are they likely to do so in the future; and the current population trend of stable or increasing on the Alaska Arctic Coastal Plain (Alaska-ACP) likely reflects population-level response to ongoing harvest levels.

Second, additional years of survey data on the Alaska-ACP further support that the breeding population, which we believe to be representative of the other breeding populations, is stable or slightly increasing in abundance.

5. How many yellow-billed loons are now estimated to be harvested on St. Lawrence Island and which breeding populations are thought to be subject to harvest there?

A yellow-billed loon study conducted on St. Lawrence Island in 2011-2012 included fall bird counts, harvest surveys, ethnographic research, and outreach activities addressing conservation concerns, with a key goal to conduct the surveys with scientific rigor. This study addressed some difficulties with previous harvest surveys and provided more reliable harvest estimates representing bird and egg harvest levels in the study communities.

In 2011, harvest estimates included 151 loons reported as common (54%), Pacific/Arctic (28%), yellow-billed (11%), and red-throated (7%) loons. In 2012, harvest estimates included 179 loons reported as nonbreeding unidentified (64%), common (3%), Pacific/Arctic (26%), yellow-billed (2%), and red-throated (4%) loons.

6. Why do earlier reports of harvest differ from the recent reports?

In the context of the 2011- 2012 St. Lawrence Island loon study, a new data release agreement was established with the villages to retrospectively evaluate 2004 to 2010 Alaska Migratory Bird Co-Management Council harvest estimates. In 2007, loon harvest estimates for the Bering Strait-Norton Sound region (4,042 loons) were largely associated with unusually high estimates for the community of Savoonga (3,748 loons, all species). The Service now has reliable information suggesting the yellow-billed loon is not a significant subsistence resource; and that the limited harvest does not have a negative impact on the population. Exceptional harvest estimates for 2007 are now thought to have resulted from issues associated with sampling design.

7. In the absence of an ESA listing, will the Service be taking any conservation actions to benefit yellow-billed loon in the future?

The Alaska Region of the Service has identified yellow-billed loon as a priority species and as such will explore opportunities to continue to work with Federal and State agencies and other partners to address information and conservation needs for this species. Subject to funding constraints, the Service plans to continue ongoing monitoring efforts in parts of the range, such as the Alaska-ACP. The yellow-billed loon will continue to receive protection under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, which prohibits, unless permitted by regulation, the take of any migratory bird, including yellow-billed loon.