

Southcentral loons awaiting breakup to get to nesting grounds

by Liz Jozwiak



With the late spring thaw and most lakes still ice covered, many residents have been asking where do the loons go if the lakes are frozen? Good question. Since loons can only land safely on open water, most are awaiting breakup along the open waters of Cook Inlet, and a few have been seen already on the lower Kenai River.

If the next time you observe a merganser-sized bird flying wide circles over a lake, take a second look, it may actually be a loon doing a reconnaissance flight checking for open water.

Loons spend their winters in waters along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, and in the Pacific Ocean along the coast from Alaska to Baja California. They can easily transition to fresh water nesting lakes in the summer because of a salt gland under the skin above each eye.

Of the 3 species of loons that occur in Southcentral Alaska, the most frequently observed loon is the common loon, a large stout diving bird with a black head, pointed bill and distinctive black and white markings on its wings and back. Less abundant is the Pacific Loon which is smaller, and silvery-gray headed with a white-striped black throat and white bars on its back.

The most secretive, and least frequently observed loon is the red-throated loon, which is similar in size

to the Pacific loon, but has a distinctive red throat patch, pale gray head, and plain back. Very little is known about the biology and nesting habitats of the red-throated loons in our area.

Male loons usually arrive on the same lake from year to year to secure the territory before the female gets there. It was always thought that a loon pair mated for life, however current banding studies have shown that about 20% of the time an individual may take a new mate for the year. Both the male and female have the same markings, but if you observe a pair side by side, the female is just a bit smaller.

Usually only 1 pair of loons will occupy a lake, but this really depends on the size and shape of the lake. Larger lakes can support more than 1 pair of breeding loons, provided there are enough secluded bays, coves, and nooks. Territories of a common loon pair can range from 100-500 acres. A pair will nest in late May/early June, and will build a nest within inches of the water.

While loons are powerful flyers and graceful swimmers, they are extremely awkward and vulnerable on land, especially when nesting. Loons incubate eggs for 27-31 days, and you are likely to see only one loon out on the lake during this time. Both adults share the incubation duties, and will trade places periodically. One or 2 chicks are born in late June, and ride on their parents' backs so the adults can provide protection from predators both above and beneath the water. It also allows the young to conserve energy and body heat. If you don't see any loon chicks by the middle of July, most likely the eggs didn't hatch or the pair didn't nest at all.

This summer you may see local lake residents observing loons on some of the local and private lakes from Kasilof to Nikiski, and on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. These newly dubbed "Loon Rangers" are participating in the Kenai Loon Watch project. They will be monitoring loon behavior and biology from a safe and non-obtrusive distance as part of the Alaska Loon Watch Program.

The data collected by Kenai Loon Watch volun-

teers will give biologists baseline information on the status of loons and their nesting success on lakes in our area.

Loons are an integral part of Alaska's beauty, a living symbol of clean air, clean water, and a high level of environmental quality. Although Alaska has a healthy populations of loons statewide, there are some concerns about the future of loons in areas that are heavily used by people. Fortunately, studies in other states have shown that loons and people can coexist if care is taken.

Breeding loons need an undisturbed nesting site, and a quiet bay to raise their young. There are several things you can do this summer to help keep Kenai loons healthy and productive:

Enjoy loons from a safe distance. If you see a loon rising out of the water running and splashing across the surface, you are too close. If the adult loon has

been scared off its nest, the eggs can chill and die, or be eaten by a predator.

Stay clear of loons and their nesting areas while boating, canoeing, or skiing. Wakes can destroy their shoreline nests and drown chicks.

Pick up discarded fishing line and tackle.

Keep dogs leashed and confined. Loose dogs and other animals can destroy nests and eggs along lakeshores.

Join the Kenai Loon Watch project and become a "Loon Ranger". Contact the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge at 262-7021 for more information.

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