

Loon conservation efforts on the Kenai

by Annie Widdel

Spending a few nights in the Swanson River Canoe System provided me a great opportunity to admire some of the finest that Mother Nature has to offer. Among those charms I witnessed on my weekend in the Canoe System, was the presence of the common loon. Listening to the loons summon their mates across a bay or hearing territorial calls ring out from surrounding lakes while my shoulders relaxed and I tumbled off to sleep was one of the most memorable parts of the trip. Loons have the power to stir the imagination and wake long-quieted wild feelings; I feel that loons deserve our close attention and stewardship.

Recently, I had the opportunity to learn about lead poisoning in waterfowl, and especially in loons. Lead poisoning, principally from birdshot and fishing tackle, is estimated to kill 1.5 to 2.5 million migratory waterfowl in the U.S. each year. I was particularly distressed to see that fishing tackle-related deaths due to lead poisoning are actually increasing.

Ignorant of the damage my own tackle box was wreaking, I was upset when I peered inside and found empty bags of lead split shot. Previously, I hadn't paid too much attention to a sinker fallen from my line, but in light of my recent self-education, I am embarrassed. Loons and other water birds that dig in the bottom of lakes and ponds for their food are at the greatest risk of lead poisoning. They swallow lead pellets when they probe the bottom for food, mistaking them for food items like seeds, small snails or clams, and insects. Lead sinkers can also be accidentally eaten in place of gravel because loons, like other birds, eat gravel to help grind food in their gizzard. Ingested lead is absorbed after being broken down in the gizzard and passed into the blood stream where it binds to red blood cells and plasma proteins and is stored in bones and vital organs.

Because lead is processed the same way as calcium, it can affect nerve impulse transmission by competing with calcium and preventing the release of neurotransmitters, resulting in paralysis. This paralysis is an observable indicator of lead poisoning in birds; it causes shaking, disorientation, decreased ability to dive or fly, slow reaction time, and droopy wings. Even when

the symptoms aren't blatantly obvious, a bird afflicted with lead poisoning is more vulnerable to disease and predation, and will have trouble finding food, building a nest, or feeding young. A loon will become emaciated and often dies within two to three weeks after eating lead, because the lead paralyzes the digestive tract and starvation follows.

Loons are slow to reproduce; a successful breeding pair fledge a chick every two years. Because this is a long-lived animal, which invests greatly in the care of each chick, the population is slow to rebound from damage. Loon populations are already declining in the Lower 48. Although the common loon is reported most often in lead poisoning cases, many other species are also negatively affected including swans, geese, herons, cranes, ducks, and eagles.

Armed with this new information I opened my tackle box with the question of what can I do as an angler? I found that there are a lot of alternatives to lead fishing tackle, and the estimated additional cost is a mere \$4 a year. Fishing weights and jigs made from non-toxic metals such as bismuth, tin, stainless steel, tungsten, recycled glass, natural granite, and special putty are available. If your local tackle shop doesn't carry these items, please don't be shy to ask them to stock their shelves with some of the non-toxic alternatives.

There are other things we can do as anglers to protect wildlife. Something as simple as picking up discarded fishing line and debris seen lying about can make a big impact in the numbers of injured wildlife. We should never leave old tackle on the shore or in the water, and lead tackle should be disposed of on "hazardous waste" days at the landfill.

I like to think that it is our responsibility to instill in our children a sense of respect for wild creatures and their habitats. Setting a good example is one of the best ways to encourage this respect. By making the effort to use some of the non-toxic alternatives, and explaining our effort to the kids, we can show the kids that we really care, that "we walk our talk." This way we can preserve the creatures that draw our attentions and feed our imaginations, and we can pass this sense of awe forward to the new generation.

If you are interested in loon conservation, you might consider joining the local community “Loon Watch” organization. In order to help biologists keep tabs on local loon populations, Loon Watch has been established to provide biologists with information about loon presence, nest success, and disturbances. Please contact the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge at 262-7021 for more information.

Additionally, the Kenai Watershed Forum is holding an informational canoe trip tomorrow, Saturday, Aug 16, 10-3pm at Peterson Lake, 12 miles east of Sterling. During the canoe trip, refuge wildlife biologist Liz Jozwiak will tell about studies with loons and

swans, along with a peek at some upcoming research using satellite technology to track loons on their annual migration paths. Interested folks should be at Peterson Lake at 10am. Several canoes will be available, but it would be good to bring your own canoe if possible.

Annie Widdel is a volunteer in the biology program at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. She is from Grand Forks, North Dakota, and graduated last year from the University of North Dakota. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters in Soldotna, call (907) 262-7021. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://kenai.fws.gov>.