

The anticipation and enjoyment of watching loons rear young

by Ted Bailey

Despite experiencing three decades of Alaskan winters, the winter of 2006-2007 seemed unusually cold and exceptionally long for me. But perhaps it was merely my increasing age and impatience for warmth outdoors, enhanced by the daily visual reminder of our rapidly dwindling firewood supply. Like many others this past winter I longed for spring and warmth. And I also longed to again hear the haunting calls of loons and to watch them rear their young on the nearby lake.

In early May the ice had been softened by the feeble but increasing sunlight and it lay loosely in long vertical crystals on the lake surface. Now it would only take a brisk wind to transform the lake once again into loon habitat. The loons would likely not be far away. They probably had already flown an aerial reconnaissance over the still frozen lake, perhaps several times, waiting patiently on nearby open water either on the Kenai River or Cook Inlet.

Finally the long awaited day arrived and according to my journal I first saw the loons bobbing together on gentle waves of the lake on May 7, 2007. They too had probably been waiting for this day for a long time.

The loon pair apparently arrived together, although according to Judith McIntyre a Minnesota, loon expert and author of the excellent book *The Common Loon: Spirit of Northern Lakes* and the Internet's Birds of North America online series *The Common Loon*, it is sometimes a single loon, the male, who is first to arrive on a lake used for nesting. But I really didn't care if they arrived separately or together, I was just thankful they had returned and that I too had survived another Alaskan winter to hear their calls and watch them again.

I assumed they, or at least one of the pair, were longtime residents of the lake. But this was merely an assumption without having direct evidence of individually recognizable or marked loons. Since loons have been known to live at least 25 to 30 years and often the same ones return to the same lake each year, I would like to think that they, like many of us older residents, were also "old timers." But regardless, even if they were younger newcomers, I still enjoyed their

presence and count it as one of the quintessential outdoor Alaskan experiences.

But with each successive year, with increasing boat and personal watercraft usage, water skiing, and shoreline development on and around the lake I feared—and still fear—that loons would eventually find the lake unsuitable for rearing young, as they have done on lakes in Anchorage and other human-dominated landscapes and that eventually the lake would become sterile—sterile in my mind from the lack of once-present loons.

Later I eagerly anticipated late June and early July when after about 26 to 31 days of incubating their eggs the young would hatch and within hours appear on the lake with their protective parents. I first saw the chicks—two black fuzzy balls—on Independence Day, July 4, bouncing in the water behind and so close to the adults that I had to watch several minutes before I was convinced that yes indeed I was seeing chicks; it was not merely my hopeful anticipation of their nesting success.

I periodically watched them grow up during the summer as other loon chicks had done on the lake in previous years. From black fuzzy balls, sometimes hitching a ride on their parents' backs to brownish elongated, loon-like creatures that they were destined to become. The parents, like most good loon parents, dived continuously and faithfully fed their chicks seemingly without ever resting, with the chicks always eager to gulp down the next small fish their parents brought to the surface. They grew rapidly but by July 12 it became obvious to me that one of the chicks was slightly smaller and less aggressive when being fed than the other chick. And it was often alone or far from the larger chick, which got more attention and food from the parents. But the smaller chick hung on and I wondered about its fate.

The first time I saw the larger chick trying to dive was on August 3. It could then only remain underwater for a few seconds before quickly bobbing unsteadily to the surface like a cork. The chicks now seemed to spend more time apart and with only one

of the parents. On August 6, I could only find one chick—the larger one—on the lake. The smaller chick had vanished, its fate unknown. I pondered; did it become prey of one of the bald eagles that periodically patrolled the lake for unwary victims? Was it predisposed to predation because of its smaller size and greater separation distance from its parents? Or was its fate sealed unknown to me by some indifference-to-loon human-related behavior of which there was plenty on the lake? Such are the unknown fates of many species of wildlife in human-dominated environments. By August 14 the larger surviving chick was able to remain underwater up to 26 seconds during its dives for food.

With only one chick left, the parents spent less time close together. One of the adults, again probably the male according to McIntyre, often remained far way from the chick and the female. Then the distant loon left the lake sometime in early September, leaving behind the chick and presumably the female who continued to feed it despite the fact that the chick was nearly adult sized. Then the female left the lake either late in the evening of September 22 or early the following morning. Although many young ducks learn migration routes by following knowledgeable adults and young trumpeter swans accompany their parents to the wintering grounds, loon parents leave their young

behind without guiding them to wintering areas. It is puzzling to others and to me how loon chicks know where to go during the winter?

Radio transmitters placed on two adult loons on the refuge in the summer of 2003, one from Dolly Varden Lake and the other from Fish Lake, sent signals to orbiting satellites indicating those loons spent that winter in the Pacific Ocean, one near Cape Douglas on the Alaska Peninsula and the other near Afognak Island. The surviving loon chick I watched throughout the summer of 2007 floated gently on the calm waters of the lake by itself on the late evening of September 26, its head tucked under its wing. That night happened to be the first cold night of the season with the temperature dropping below freezing. The next morning in the slanting early sunlight I searched the lake in vain with my binoculars but the loon chick had apparently already departed into the frigid air toward some distant destination known only to wintering loons.

Ted Bailey is a retired Kenai National Wildlife Refuge wildlife biologist who has lived on the Kenai Peninsula for over 30 years. He is an adjunct instructor at the Kenai Peninsula College and maintains a keen interest in the Kenai Peninsula's wildlife and natural history. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.