

# Crazy about those loons

By Dr. Reese Halter

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The call of the loon symbolizes the wild kingdom. At least once a year I recommend visiting the water-rich north and experience its magnificent serenity.

Loons are amongst the oldest birds in North America, dating back some 65 million years to the time of Tyrannosaurus Rex.

Loons are a remarkable cross between a submarine and a fighter jet.

There are five species: yellow-billed, common, Pacific, Arctic and the slimmest — the red-throated loon.

Loons are larger than ducks with longer bodies and thicker necks than grebes. Loons spend most of their life on water only coming ashore to mate and nest. Its body is perfectly designed for an aquatic ecosystem.

All adults have red eyes. The color of the eyes relays important information like breeding age and ability to attract a mate. Sleeping loons close outer eyelids upward over their eyes.

Loons are awesome divers. Most dives last for about one minute and reach a depth of 13 feet. The record, however, is more than five minutes under water to an astounding depth of about 320 feet or the equivalent of a 32-story building.

The next time you see a loon on a lake, notice how low in the water they sit (they are dense-boned whereas most other birds are hollow-boned) and they hold their dagger-like bill (which is made of keratin, the same substance in human fingernails) tilted upwards. Loons are low riders with attitude!

In order to dive, a loon squeezes air from its feathers by pressing its wings against its body, emptying internal air sacs along its backbone. Nose and throat valves prevent water from entering the lungs. Head down, a kick of its webbed feet and the torpedo-shaped loon is launched without a splash.

During a dive the loon closes a clear nictitating membrane over each eye — just like Olympian swimmer goggles — to protect the eyes from freshwater dirt and saltwater irritations. Above the water the membranes blink to clear the eyes.

Loons have monocular vision from eyes on either side of their skull, enabling a wide vision underwater to hunt. After spotting its prey, it dives.

Like a powerful vacuum cleaner the loon sucks in small water insects, minnows, leeches, snails, frogs and salamanders. Larger fish are grasped crosswise in the bill, taken to the surface and swallowed whole. Like grouse, loons swallow small pebbles that aid in grinding bones and other hard bits of food into smaller pieces.

Males and females have the same coloration and grow a breeding plumage to attract mates in the spring and in the autumn they molt to a duller color of winter feathers.

The loons' checkerboard black and white feathers offer protection under water, their black and white spots mimic sunlight shimmering on the water, offering camouflage against bald and golden eagles. Winter plumage camouflages them from sharks and orcas.

All loons, except the red-throated, require about 500 feet of open water for a runway to take off. Like a floatplane, loons patter or run into the wind across the surface of the water, flapping their wings.

Loons fly in a hunchback position, head down, neck lower than back — resembling the lowered nose of a jet. A loon cannot soar like an eagle or swoop like a swallow but their swift, powerful wing beats enable them to fly as fast as a car moving at 70 mph.

Male and female loons winter apart. In the spring they return to their lake of birth. Elaborate courtships that include: bobbing, dipping and diving together lead to several days of mating on the shoreline. Two brown spotted eggs are laid in nests of raised grasses and reeds, used year after year by the same pair.

Four weeks later, chicks hatch and immediately take to the water and their feet may not touch land for another year. Parents' piggyback young for their first four weeks, protecting them from snapping turtles and fish. A family of four will devour about two tons of fish in one summer.

In the autumn, chicks along with adults migrate to the ocean. Juveniles stay on the coast for up to three years before returning to their birth lake. Loons can live for 30 years.

The loons' call is primeval; it carries for miles on the water. They have four different calls but it's most recognizable whoo-EEE-ooo followed by an insane asylum laugh — surely this led to the saying "crazy as a loon."

Native North Americans consider the loon sacred for worthy reasons. The loon is the state bird of Minnesota and the provincial bird — as selected by school children — of Ontario, Canada.

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