

Tips for Boating Safely Near Loons

By Sheila Johnston

The loons have returned and their haunting and wild calls are echoing across our lakes. Loons on the Gull chain of lakes face many threats. Raccoons, gulls, ravens, crows, large fish, and snapping turtles eat eggs, and may also eat chicks. While people can be a friend to loons, we are also capable of being their worst enemy. Shoreline development disturbs traditional nesting and chick rearing areas. Recreational activities can be a threat if they occur too close to active nests, chick rearing areas, and loons on open water. Each summer juvenile loons and adults are struck and killed by careless boaters.

The Gull chain of lakes is fortunate to have many loon nesting areas. Many of these nesting areas are located in or near the channels on Lake Margaret, Upper Gull, Bass, Spider, Roy, and Nisswa Lakes. Your actions can help protect our precious loons. Here's how you you can help:

- Be aware that loons may be nesting in the channel areas. If you see a nest, please keep your distance. Loons may abandon their nests if people come too close. Memorial Day weekend is particularly dangerous for loons with too many boats and too many people near nesting areas. Please remind friends and family members to keep their distance.
- Respect the wake zone and keep your boat wake low. Boat wakes can wash the eggs off the nest.
- Chicks hatch about the fourth week of June, or possibly sooner in years with early ice out. After hatching, the parents escort the chicks to the nursery, a calm secluded area. Peace and quiet is essential, so resist the temptation to get close.
- PLEASE SLOW DOWN! As the chicks mature, the parents move out of the secluded areas to chick rearing areas. Unfortunately, this often puts the chicks in the pathways of boats. The chick rearing areas are in the channels as well as in the open water before or after the no wake zones. Many people drive through these chick rearing areas at high speed. Please slow down before you reach the no wake zones and keep your speed low as you exit the no wake zones. Be alert for loons and juveniles and give them space. The juveniles are often left alone for short periods while their parents fish and socialize. Loon chicks cannot dive when very young to get out of the way of boats. They also tire easily. Chicks and juveniles may not be boat savvy. Even adult loons have difficulty staying out of harm's way as multiple boats approach and exit the channels at high speed.
- KEEP YOUR DISTANCE! When in open water, continue to watch for loons and keep your distance. If possible, keep 150 feet away from loons. Give more distance if it calls or shows other signs of distress.

- DO NOT HARRASS! Never circle loons while jet skiing. This is harassment and is subject to a fine from DNR. When pulling tubers, skiers, or wakeboarders, do not circle loons, do not allow tubers or skiers to get close to loons, and do not cut between and separate loon families.
- If loons give a warning tremolo call, or rise up and flap their wings, move away.
- Never feed loons. Loons that are fed may learn to go after baited hooks and could get caught.
- Fourth of July weekend and the preceding and following weeks are very dangerous times for loons. The chain of lakes is overcrowded with boats and boating etiquette seems to be at its worst. Please remind others to slow down and keep their distance from loons.
- Report harassment of loons or injured loons to your local conservation officer, Randy Posner, 218 575-2289, or Tim Collette, 218 232-1775. Be sure to get boat identification information, if possible.
- Please share this information with others and keep our loons safe!