

2021 Loon Report
By Sheila Johnston

2021 proved to be another challenging season for loons on the Gull Chain of Lakes. Our loons are generally on the nest around May 1st, and chicks typically hatch around June 1st. As in 2020, black flies were again the problem. Simulium annulus are blood-sucking black flies that specifically attack common loons. Infestations are often worse when a cold spring is followed by a sudden warm up. They are problematic for loons for about three weeks. If a heavy infestation occurs during the incubation period, it can cause loons to abandon their nests. If the loons persist with incubation despite the relentless attacks of black flies, they face a serious threat from blood-borne parasites which could weaken them and shorten their lives.

Thanks to the efforts of a dedicated team of volunteers, two loon surveys were conducted: the spring nest survey and the July adult and chick survey. Due to the impact of low water levels on boat access, we were unable to conduct the August/September survey of surviving chicks.

Because some loons had abandoned their nests before the nest survey dates, we extended the nest survey dates to account for second nestings that occurred after the black fly infestation had subsided. 15 active nests were counted. On Upper Gull, there were 5 mated pairs of loons. All five pairs abandoned their nests in May. Loons will often mate again after nest failure, but only three of the Upper Gull pairs mated again. One pair abandoned their second nest during the third week of incubation. The other two pairs hatched chicks around the Fourth of July, the most dangerous time for loon survival on the chain.

93 adults and 13 chicks were counted during the July survey. This is a significantly lower number of adults than were counted in the peak year of 2020, when 125 adult loons were counted. The ratio of chicks to nests was 1.1, which is consistent with the previous two years. However, this does not indicate the number of chicks that survived the season. On Upper Gull, two chicks were killed in mid-July, and an observer reported seeing them run over by a pontoon. An informal survey of surviving chicks was done in September on the northern lakes in the chain, and 1 chick survived on Lake Margaret, 1 chick on Upper Gull, and 1 chick on Roy Lake.

Death by watercraft is one of the leading causes of loon mortality and boating cautiously near both adults and chicks is imperative. Loon parents will not dive if they are protecting chicks, and heavy high-speed boat traffic puts both adults and chicks in frequent danger. Refraining from setting off fireworks over the water where there are loons in the area, using lead-free fishing tackle, picking up broken fishing line, and preserving and restoring natural shorelines are actions we can take to protect our loons. Let's give these actions our best effort so that loons can thrive on the Gull Chain of Lakes!

