

2019 Loon Report



By Sheila Johnston, Environmental Committee Chair
Photos by Sheila Johnston

Thanks to a dedicated crew of GCOLA volunteers a spring loon nest count was completed in June, a chick and adult survey was done in July, and a chick survey was done in September. The September chick survey was added to determine the number of chicks that survived the season.

The total number of nests counted was 14, which was three more than in 2018. An additional natural nest was identified on Upper Gull after the nest count for a total of 15.

There was a total of 109 adult loons counted on the chain. This is an increase of 39 loons from 2018. The number of adult loons on Gull Lake increased significantly, from 49 to 73. The number of adult loons on Roy Lake increased from four to 10 loons. There were two loons on Love Lake. This is the first time that adult loons have been identified during the survey on Love Lake since 2014.

The total number of chicks counted during the July survey was 15. Seven chicks were counted on Gull Lake in July, and six survived into September. On Upper Gull there were five pairs of loons with chicks in 2018. In 2019, four of the five pairs did not successfully raise chicks. One pair had a nest washout, one pair did not have any chicks, and two pairs had chicks that did not survive until the July chick survey. The pair that nests in the channel near Lost Lake Resort had twins that both survived into September. The Bass Lake pair did not have chicks this year. On Lake Margaret chicks were identified on the north end and in the middle section of the lake, but the pair from the south end did not have chicks. One of the Lake Margaret chicks survived into September. Two chicks were counted on Spider Lake but did not survive into September. There were three chicks counted on Roy Lake, including one pair of twins. One of the twins did not survive. There was one chick on Nisswa Lake, and it survived into September.

The total number of chicks counted in July was six fewer than in 2018, which had the highest number of chicks since 2014. However, considering the threats that chicks face from predators and watercraft, the survival rate of the chicks from the July count was good. Of the 15 chicks counted in July, 12 chicks survived into September.

In September, many of the adult loons leave their chicks and they gather on Gull Lake before they migrate. The newly independent chicks may range from the summer chick rearing areas and sometimes leave the area to gather with other juveniles. This makes it difficult to do an accurate chick count in September, so we will be changing our procedures for next year.

The question remains, how can we increase the survival rate of chicks and adult loons on the Gull Chain of Lakes? First, preserve natural shorelines and loon nesting habitat. Always use caution near nesting sites. Keep your wake low to prevent nest washouts. If you put out a nesting platform, make sure it is in good condition. Clean it and put fresh nesting material on the platform in the spring before loons return to the nest. Stay away from nesting loons. Loons that are threatened will abandon the nest. Use caution and keep your speed down near loon families that are on the water.

If you are a fisherperson, please do not leave cut or broken line in the water. This year an increased number of adult and juvenile loons in Minnesota were entangled in cut or broken fishing line and embedded with hooks and lures. If you see cut line in the water or on the shoreline, please pick it up. Please “get the lead out” and do not use lead fishing tackle. Over 40 percent of loon deaths are caused by lead fishing tackle. Loons pick up pebbles from the lake bottom to aid digestion. Lead sinkers can drop to the lake bottom and remain there among the pebbles. Just one small lead sinker inadvertently ingested by a loon picking up pebbles, or an ingested lead jig can cause fatal lead poisoning. Information on lead alternatives can be found on the Lead Out page at www.pca.state.mn.us .

If you see loons being harassed, please record the boat registration number and call Cass County Sheriff, 218 547-1424, or Crow Wing Sheriff, 218 829-4749. If you see an injured or sick loon call, Lori Nauman, DNR Nongame Wildlife Representative, 651-259-5148 or Wild and Free Wildlife Rehabilitation, 320 692-4180. Wild and Free is a DNR and USFWS licensed wildlife rehabilitator located at the Garrison Animal Hospital.

Are you interested in helping to protect our loons or volunteering for the loon survey? To learn more about GCOLA’s loon programs, please visit www.gcola.org. If you have questions, email sheilafjohnston@me.com

