

2017 LOON INITIATIVES REPORT

MADGE LAKE, DUCK MT. PROVINCIAL PARK



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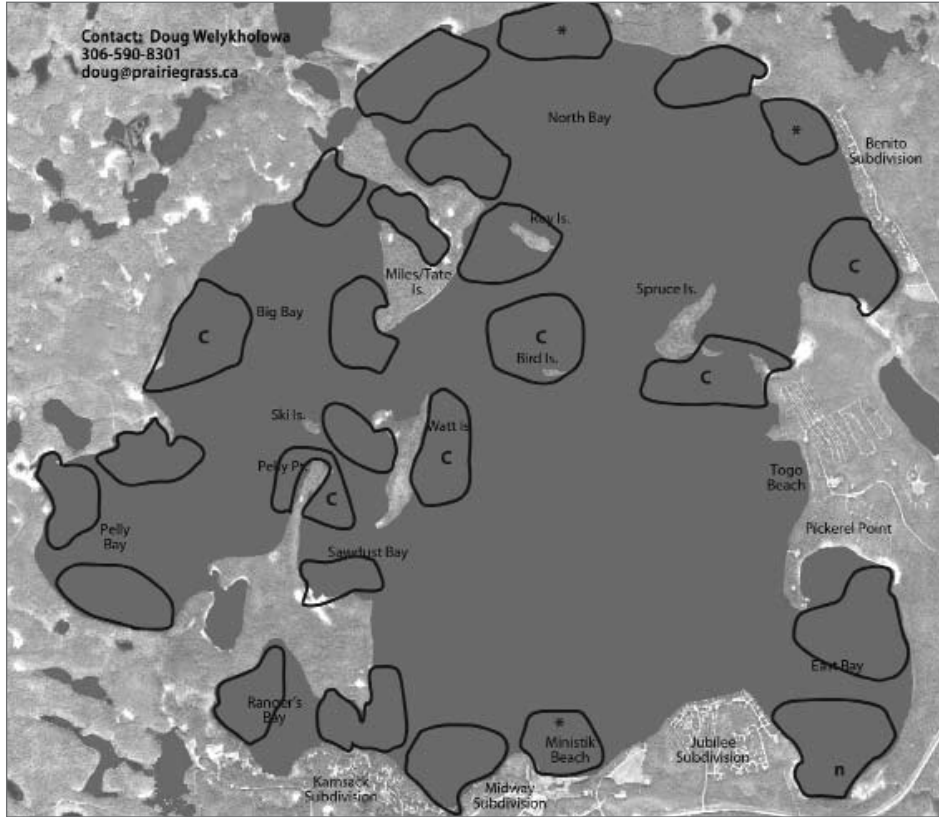


FIGURE 1: 2016 established loon territories.

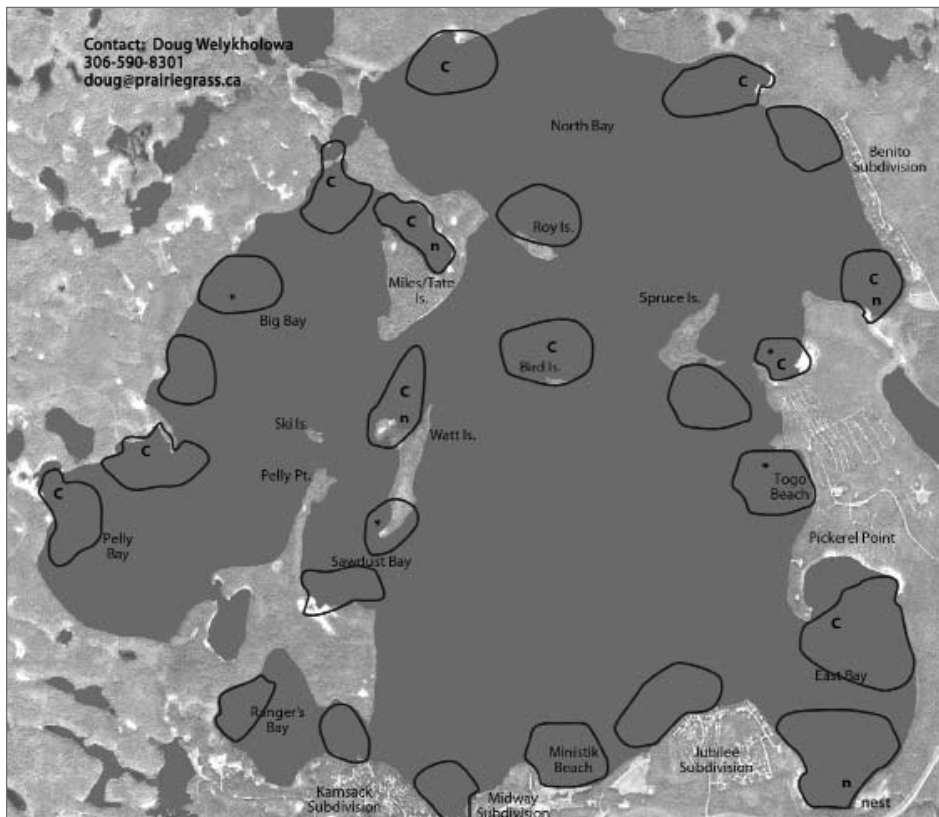


FIGURE 2: 2017 established loon territories.

The Yellowhead Flyway Birding Trail Association Loon Initiatives Committee (YFBTA LIC) conducted its annual loon survey at Madge Lake over the spring and summer months. We also continued to work on other initiatives involving education and information about the Common Loon with the Duck Mountain Provincial Park Interpreters.

For the third year in a row, the ice was off the lake about three weeks earlier than in recent years. This allowed the various migratory birds, including loons, to gain access to their nesting grounds early.

Loons that have previously established territories on Madge will normally return to the same spot unless something has happened to disrupt the pair or if undesirable changes to the territory have occurred. Each year we have noted up to a 25 per cent change in territories, with the old ones being abandoned or modified and new ones established. This may be a result of old pairs not returning, and new pairs establishing a new territory, or established pairs abandoning one area for another. We have also noted some modifications to the rough

boundaries of older territories each year, based on where each pair tends to frequent.

The two maps (Fig. 1 and 2) show the changes to the territories observed from 2016 to 2017. Twenty-five territories were observed this year, down one from 2016. Five territories from 2016 were abandoned, and four new ones (marked with * in Figure 2) were established. Note that three of the five abandoned territories were initially occupied in the spring, but they were abandoned by early July. The territories marked with a 'C' indicate where chicks were successfully hatched. Four nests (marked with an 'n') were found and photographed this year, compared with only one in 2016. Note that a number of reoccupied territories showed some change from 2016, and two of the newly established territories were in areas that had

previously been occupied prior to 2016. What has become apparent since we started keeping detailed records in 2012, is that the birds avoid certain areas, but will re-use a previously occupied area.

We found five newly hatched chicks on June 20 and an additional eight on July 8, with one of the previous five failing to survive. In August, we found an additional four juveniles with adults that had been observed displaying nesting behaviour in June and July. In total, 16 of the 17 hatchlings survived into the fall. An additional 12 juveniles were noted on the lake in mid-September, for a total of 28 juveniles. These were likely fly-ins from other areas, as they were feeding in areas outside the established territories. By this time, only 25 adults remained on the lake, with the others departing for their winter feeding grounds.



FIGURE 3: New loon nests discovered in 2017. Photo credits: Doug Welykholowa

POETRY

Greetings

I slowly walked across the old farmyard
(my boyhood home three-quarters century
ago), grayed house and rusty barn still there
to greet me on this chill November day,
with sometime spits of rain. Beyond the barn
in a low dip of pasture stretched a slough
not there before, the wet years now prevailing,
and boasting stands of cattails, rank on rank,
their tannish spikes just past the point of bursting--
a something else to greet, appreciate.

Then from the west appeared a massive bird,
an eagle in slow flight, a lumbering
of wings, to almost where I stood--and then
before continuing its eastward course,
its moving heavily away, it paused;
and with an easy soaring, sailed a brief
half-circle there about me, which became,
it seemed, a kind of greeting too (at least
surveillance of this earthbound man-thing, waving).

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Three of the four nests observed went on to produce surviving hatchlings, while the single egg on the fourth one failed to hatch. Two of the four nests were on the flanks of beaver lodges, while the other two were on well-protected shorelines. We were unable to spot the nests in the remaining territories from the water. We will track these sites in the future to see if the birds continue to return to the same nesting site.

As in the previous two years, we have also observed that some birds appear to be hiding their chicks in areas that are difficult to get to with power boats. This is based on observations of loon pairs where no chicks are spotted, but where these pairs exhibit the same type of nervous, protective behaviour throughout the summer that loons with chicks display. Occasionally we then observe these same birds later protecting juveniles at the end of the season in their established territories. It appears to be more prevalent in areas where the boat traffic is higher.

This year we again noted large numbers of unpaired adults feeding on the lake. Up to 20 birds at a time were observed on any given day, with at least 28 unpaired adults occupying the lake during the middle of the summer. Extrapolating our figures, the lake was averaging 70 to 80 loons throughout the summer, including the 25 territorial pairs and the unpaired groups. This is consistent with previous years' counts. See Table 1 for the monthly counts.

Overall, the adult loon population continues to thrive. Note that our chick/juvenile count was more than double the number observed last year. The health of the lake itself doesn't seem to be a problem, as other species such as grebes and ducks appear to be increasing in numbers each year. As in previous



FIGURE 4: Adult and four-week-old chick. Photo credit: Doug Welykholowa



FIGURE 5: Adult and two juveniles (approximately eight weeks old). Photo credit: Doug Welykholowa

years, where we lack data is in how many nests are actually occupied and how many eggs are laid, in order to draw meaningful conclusions on chick production and survivability. As noted previously, we are not currently capable of doing a proper nest search and egg count. This would have to be the subject for possible research grants in the future.

In addition to the annual Madge Lake Loon Survey, the LIC continues to work on a number of other projects. This included the deployment of three sets of loon nesting buoys. The intent is to keep power boats from approaching these areas too closely, in order to protect eggs and young chicks from drowning in boat wakes. The park and YFBTA LIC will review their use and placement annually. Other projects were providing the

park interpreters with photos and research documents on the Common Loon, and assisting the interpreters in presenting their loon program on two occasions.

Two other events involving the loons at the lake are worth noting. First, on June 29, Kim and Colleen Pennell spotted a Loon and a small chick in the ditch across from DJ's service (Figure 7). Apparently, the loon was attempting to crawl from the slough on that side of the road to the lake. Both Greg Podovinnikoff and I were notified, but neither of us could find any sign of the loons when we got there shortly afterwards. Had we found them, we would have attempted to capture and transport them to a spot on the lake where they could feed without interference from other loons. The odd thing is that the slough they

TABLE 1. 2017 Count Results.

PERIOD	PAIRED ADULTS	UNPAIRED ADULTS	CHICKS/JUVENILES
JUN - EARLY JUL	56	6	12
MID JUL - MID AUG	50	28	12
LATE AUG	50	5	16



FIGURE 6: A group of three young adults. Photo credit: Doug Welykholowa

were in is too small for the adults to fly in and out of, so what likely happened is that the adults got stranded there in the spring, and somehow managed to safely raise one chick. We don't know what happened to these birds, as they weren't spotted again.

The second event was two videos sent to me, via Maureen Falkiner, from cottage owners who were kayaking in Ranger Bay in early July. They found themselves near a group of nine young adult loons. The loons appeared to be swimming together and were being very vocal, sounding their tremolo (crazy laugh) call. They also began to do the penguin dance and flap their wings while scuttling across the surface of the water. Had it been a single pair of loons doing this, it would have indicated that the birds were nervous with having the kayakers that close to them. However, after I did some reading, I discovered that what was likely happening is that this group of young unpaired loons were simply interacting with each other, and the dancing, etc., was most likely the loons attempting to assert a pecking

order. They were close to the known territory of a pair of loons, and it is likely that the male of that pair had joined the group and was perhaps agitated by their presence in his territory. Researchers in Ontario and Minnesota have previously noted this type of behaviour.

We will continue to work with the park staff to improve awareness of nesting loons on Madge Lake through information provided by the park interpretation program, brochures, and signage, as well as reports to the cottage owners.



FIGURE 7: Adult loon and chick attempting to cross highway across from DJ's service. Note the small chick at the rear of the adult, its head underneath the adult's tail feathers. Photo credit: Kim and Colleen Pennell.

I am also appealing to have other cottage owners with boats assist me in doing periodic counts in areas that they may frequent throughout the summer. This would greatly assist us by providing additional statistics, which will help us in better analyzing our count information. I have count sheets available for their use. Please contact me if you are interested.

We would once again like to thank the many agencies that have provided assistance and sponsorship for our various projects: Duck Mountain Provincial Park Staff, the Saskatchewan Fish and Wildlife Development fund, Nature Saskatchewan, Bird Studies Canada and the YFBTA. We would also like to thank the park residents who have taken an interest in our projects and those who have contributed to the annual survey. These include Sharon Korb and Kevin Streat, Lloyd and Sandra Benson, Bill Graham, Barb Trofimenikoff and Clark Gable. We would also like to thank acting park staff and the park interpreters, who have provided excellent support and continue to work closely with us on all our loon-related projects. Lastly, thanks to the Madge Lake Cottage Owners Association (MLCOA), which sponsors our continuing membership in the Birds Studies Canada annual Lakes Loon Survey. 🐦