

# COMMON LOON KILLS DUCKLINGS

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On Friday, 21 July 1989, between 8:00 a.m. and 9:00 a.m. at Chitek Lake, Saskatchewan, while in the field with more Friesen to identify birds in the area, I witnessed a behavioral aspect of Common Loon that neither of us had seen before. While we were attempting to move in closer to a pair of flycatchers perched in some shrubbery overhanging the water, an adult duck, exhibiting signs of distress, was spotted out on the lake. On closer examination with binoculars, she was identified as a Mallard and appeared to be showing signs of distraction display.

While we were watching her, four

downy ducklings came into view. The young birds, at the urging of the female, were headed out toward the centre of the lake as fast as their little legs would take them. This behaviour seemed odd at the time because there did not appear to be anything near them that would cause such distress. As we continued to watch them, something created a splash in the water and the duckling at the rear of the group disappeared under the water. Shortly after its disappearance an adult loon surfaced and pounced on top of the third duckling, taking it under the water. This was repeated for the second and first young Mallards as they were frantically trying to escape. As this was taking



Common Loon

B. De Vries

place, the adult Mallard attempted to protect her young from the loon's attack by rushing towards it and flapping her wings. However, her efforts were in vain as it was evident she was much smaller than the loon.

The first three ducklings did not reappear after going under. However, the last one, which had been the first in the line of escape, rose to the surface inverted, its feet frantically fanning the air until eventually no motion was evident. The loon remained close to the scene while another loon joined it. Both loons floated casually in the area while preening themselves as the dead young bird floated on the surface 2-3 feet away. The female Mallard made several passes as if in search of her young, eventually giving up and moving off to another part of the lake. There were no signs of young loons with the adults and there was no evidence to indicate that the loons had fed on the dead birds. Upon our departure the loons remained in the area of the attack.

There are other instances of loons killing birds. In Europe, Common Loons were seen eating young Common Golden Retrievers.<sup>1</sup> In New Hampshire, a group of unmated loons attacked and killed a young loon chick.<sup>2</sup> Candace Savage reports that the Common Loon diet, in addition to fish, also "includes crustaceans, amphibians, and, occasionally, the young of other water birds."<sup>3</sup> In the Northwest Territories, an Arctic Loon had a furious fight with a Canada Goose defending its nest. The full length of the loon's bill entered the goose, puncturing its lung, and killing it.

<sup>1</sup>JONES, R. N. and M. OBBARD. 1970. Canada Goose killed by Arctic Loon and subsequent pairing of its mate. *Auk* 87: 371.

<sup>2</sup>KLEIN, TOM. 1985. *Loon magic*. Falcon Press, Ashland, WI. 145 pp.

<sup>3</sup>SAVAGE, CANDACE. 1985. *The world of Canadian birds*. Western Producer Prairie Books, Saskatoon, SK. 211 pp.

## WINTERING HORNED LARKS IN SOUTH SASKATCHEWAN

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The Big Muddy Christmas Bird Count was first undertaken in 1988; the Bromhead count is now in its 3rd year. While the topography of the two circles is different, the centers of these counts are less than 100 km from each other, and both are less than 30 km north of the 49th parallel.

The 1988 counts occurred on 28 December for Bromhead; and 29 December in the Big Muddy circle. The

weather in both areas was essentially the same. Both days were sunny with a little cloud. Temperatures ranged between -20° and -15° C under light conditions.

Golden Eagles, Snowy Owls, Partridges and Ring-necked Pheasants were observed in both areas. Sharp-tailed Grouse were conspicuous by their absence at both sites.