
NOTES AND LETTERS

COMMON LOON EXPERIENCES AT ANGLIN LAKE, SK

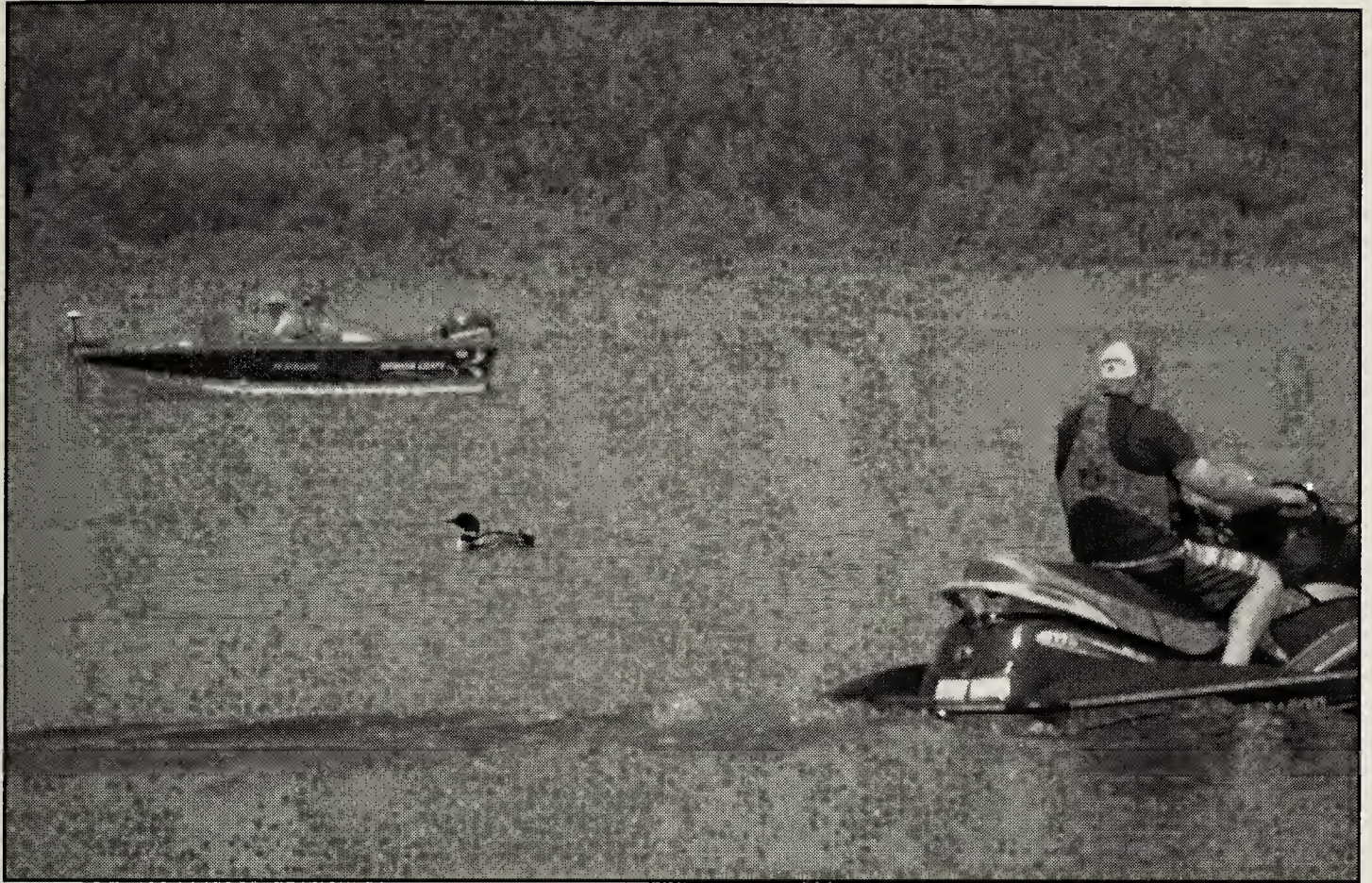
I have lived over half of my 88-year lifetime at Anglin Lake, SK. Here I assist Warren and Evelyn Hoffman of Humboldt with their annual Loon Count. I am proud that, for its size, only 1534 ha, Anglin has the largest concentration of breeding common loons (*Gavia immer*) of any Canadian lake surveyed by the Canadian Lakes Loon Survey. With an average of 36 pairs, 1991–1999, Anglin Lake loons raised a record 60 young in 1995. We watched them from their arrival – in 2008 on May 2 – until the last one departed on November 10.

Two aspects of their anatomy make loons different from ducks. The loon must run along the water, into the wind, before it can become airborne; on a calm day, it might take several hundred meters for a loon to gain flight. One morning in late November, I awoke to find Jacobsen Bay closed in with clear, shining ice following a very sharp overnight frost. We studied the only open water, a dark green patch near the islands across the lake. It was occupied by six goldeneye ducks (*Bucephala* sp.) and a single common loon. The open water was only 40 or 50 feet in diameter. We watched with binoculars as the loon made two attempts to take off, but before it was airborne, its attempted takeoff merely sent it sliding along the ice like a curling rock. It pushed with its feet along the ice, slowly and laboriously, to get back to the open water.

At this point, we dressed warmly and mounted our rescue mission. We put two wooden paddles and two 4-foot lengths of electrical conduit pipe in the canoe and hoped for an easy trip sliding along the

smooth ice. Twenty-five feet from shore, the canoe broke through and so we had to break ice ahead of us across the entire width of the lake. As we approached the open water, the ducks took off while the loon called wildly and then dove. When we reached the open water, the loon surfaced, called, and directed its long takeoff run along the narrow path of open water we had just created. The loon was fortunately directed exactly into the wind, careening off the floating ice blocks that marked its patch. When it reached flying speed, it circled and called – we thought triumphantly. We felt adequately rewarded for our 2 hours of heavy exertion.

The second aspect of loon anatomy is the placement of their feet, far back on their body. This allows them superb diving skills but makes them very clumsy on land. I drove on Highway 952 towards Christopher Lake and Highway 2. Just over the first hill from our resort, I saw a dark object moving slowly across the paved highway. It was a loon, moving with great difficulty. A half-ton truck approached, so I flagged it down. The Finnish gentleman who operated the La Ronge airport agreed to help me rescue this loon, since we did not wish to leave it there in the ditch to die. I took my plastic overalls from the trunk of my car and threw them over and around the loon, which remained amazingly placid. I picked up the loon with no difficulty, but each of us was alone and headed in opposite directions. What could we do? Neither of us could drive while holding the bird. Doctor Powell fortuitously came along and offered to take the loon to his cottage at Waskesiu. His wife drove, while the doctor held the loon in his arms all the



At Loon Lake, SK, a common loon, caught between a motor boat and a personal water craft, appears unfazed.
Victoria Kjoss

way, and then released it into Waskesiu Lake, where it swam into deeper water and dove several times. Later I read in *Loon Magic*, by Tom and Pat Klein, how loons sometimes perceive a stretch of wet asphalt highway as a stretch of water and attempt to land on it.

The natural curiosity of loons at Jacobsen Bay, Anglin Lake, has allowed us to study them in their natural habitat. A pair has nested on a tiny island in a very quiet bay for the past 15 years. I have watched them on and around their nest, turning their eggs and changing places to

incubate. The presence of my Samoyed dog in the canoe does not seem to bother them. Later, after hatch, both young ride on the back of one parent only. Our large tour boat piques their interest, and they often swim quite close.

I thank Dr. Stuart Houston for his encouragement and assistance, and Warren and Evelyn Hoffman for their annual loon count data.

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Look deep into nature, and then you will understand everything better.

- Albert Einstein