

2020 LOON INITIATIVES REPORT: MADGE LAKE, DUCK MOUNTAIN PROVINCIAL PARK



Loon and ice, 4 May 2020. All photos courtesy of Doug Welykholowa.



Loon with chick, 20 June 2020.



Loon on nest, 14 June 2020.

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As with last year, the 2020 season at Madge Lake began with a late spring, as birds arrived a week later than previous years. Loons were flying in while most of the ice was still on the lake and were occupying narrow strips of open water for about a week. As a result, nesting probably didn't start until the second week in May. Our first spotting of young was 20 June.

Bob Wynes, another Madge Lake resident, was kind enough to assist me on the survey this year. He and I went out together twice and he also did two trips accompanied by friends. He is a great help and an excellent sounding board.

Adult Common Loons maintained about the same numbers as in previous years, with 26 pair maintaining their territories throughout the season, and approximately 20 unpaired young adults occupying the lake throughout. A total of 12 chicks/juveniles were spotted over the summer and 10 survived until September. The last count on 17 September had 24 adults and 22 juveniles. We believe 12 of these juveniles came from neighbouring lakes, although there is a good possibility that a couple were raised on Madge.

Two territories, previously abandoned, were re-established, and one territory from 2019 was abandoned this year. Otherwise, most of the territories remained from last year, with some modifications to the size of some. Note that changes to the size and shape of the territories are strictly observational based on our sightings each year (see

Figures 1 and 2 for a comparison of the 2019 and 2020 established territories (see Figures 1 and 2 for a comparison of the 2019 and 2020 established territories).

As noted in previous reports, we are spotting fewer chicks in the open during the majority of the season. This year, we spotted seven chicks shortly after they hatched, but two of these didn't survive the season, and another wasn't spotted again until September. In mid-September we spotted an additional five juveniles that we are confident were hatched on the lake, but were hidden from us throughout the summer. This is based on observations of nesting and protective behaviour in those territories, as well as spotting juveniles in September in their nascent territory either by themselves or accompanied by one or two adults. We are unsure as to why many adults are keeping their young hidden and away from open water during the majority of the summer. With an apparent increase over the years of larger wakeboats and personal watercraft on the lake, perhaps the loons are getting defensive, but that is only speculation at this point.

One unusual sighting occurred on 20 August, and confirmed on 26 August with photographs, was an adult loon that had completely moulted into its winter colours. In the past, in late August, we have noted a number of partially-moulted adults, but this is the first one that had completed the process. We even found a moulted wing coverlet with the distinctive white markings very close to this adult. I have included a photo of it as well as a typical juvenile. The main differences are size and the lack of the distinctive light beige scallops on the wing coverlets of the juvenile. The adult was distinctively larger than any of the juveniles spotted.

Comparing data over the last 10 years (Figure 3), the adult loon population has been very stable. The

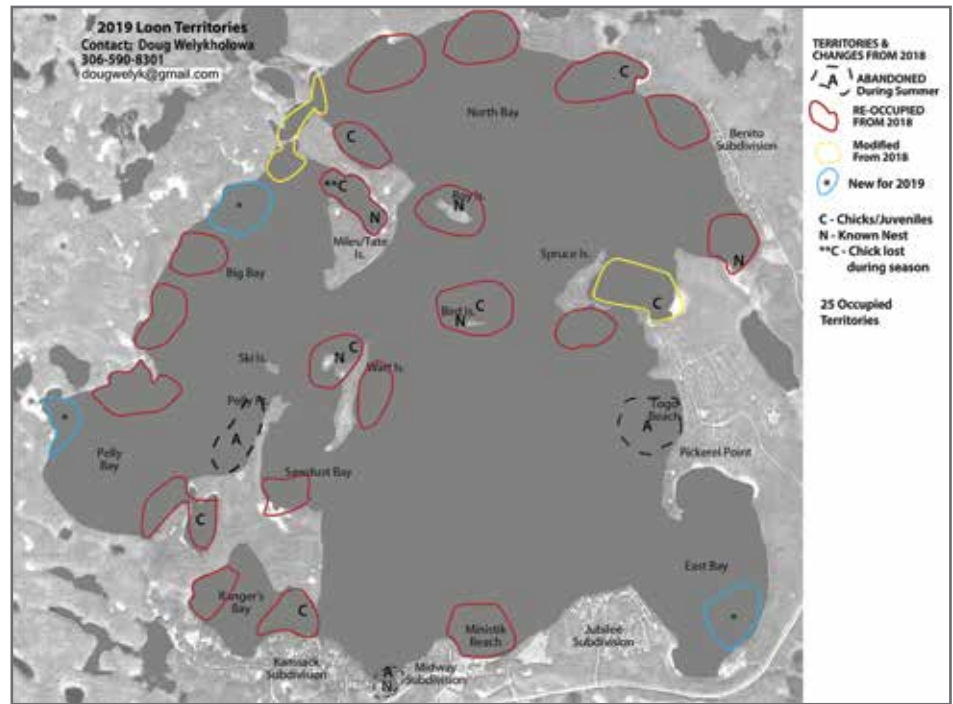


FIGURE 1: 2019 Established Loon Territories.

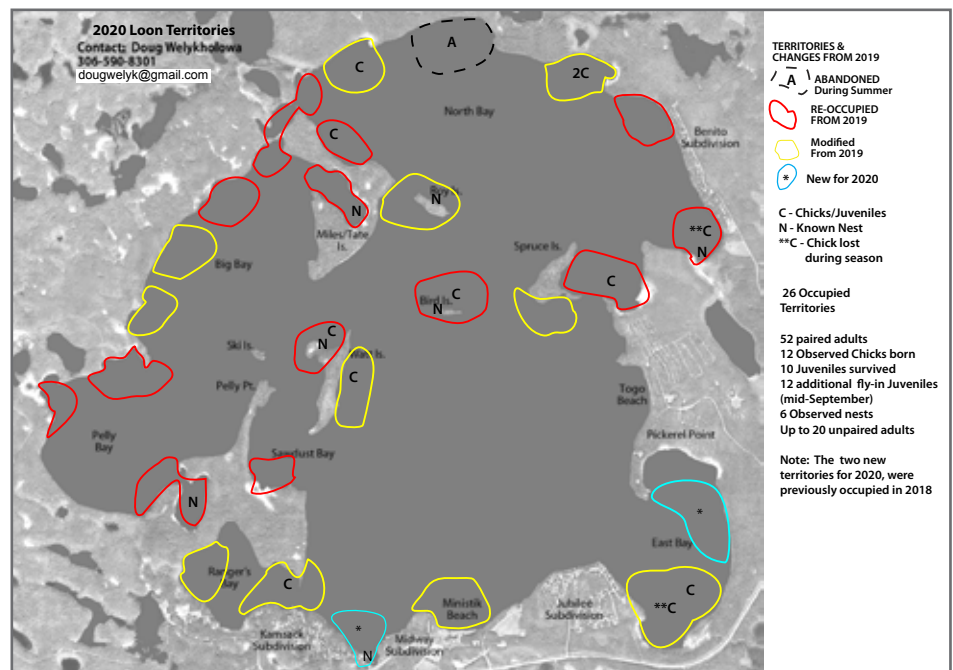


FIGURE 2: 2020 Established Loon Territories.

year-to-year variation is likely due to inaccuracies in counting the unpaired young adults. During the day, the large groups scatter in to individuals and smaller groups, with some of the birds flying to adjacent lakes to feed. They tend to gather in larger groups in the evenings, but group size and location varies each evening. Limited counts over the summer prevent us from getting an accurate number of

these four-to-six year-old adults. We will conduct evening counts in the future to get more accurate numbers.

In addition to the loons, we spotted a number of different species of note on the lake this year. At least three pelicans remained for the summer. Groups of six to 10 cormorants were spotted in various locations, as were Bald Eagles, Ospreys and Great Blue Herons.



Adult in full winter molt, 26 August 2020.



Adult and juvenile, 26 August 2020.

Madge Lake Loon Count Summaries 2010 - 2020

Survey Year	Total Adults	# of Territorial Pair	Surviving Juveniles	# of Chicks Lost
2010/12 average		25	9	
2013	75	26	14	2
2014	86	26	9	2
2015	78	26	6	2
2016	82	26	10	0
2017	78	25	16	1
2018	72	26	12	0
2019	75	25	7	1
2020	72	26	10	2

FIGURE 3: Madge Lake loon count summaries, 2010-2020.



A Bald Eagle nest at Doukhobor Bay, 30 May 2020.



American White Pelican.

One pair of Bald Eagles built a nest within 100 feet of one of the loon nests. The loon nest was initially occupied, but was abandoned before any eggs could hatch, although the adults remained in that territory. We speculate that the close proximity to the eagle nest disturbed the loons; although, if eggs were laid, they could have been predated.

Of special note, a pair of Trumpeter Swans with four cygnets was observed on a beaver pond near the north end of Madge Lake earlier in the summer of 2020. During the September loon survey, a pair of Trumpeter Swans was observed with three cygnets in Big Bay, presumably the pair that nested on the beaver pond. This is the first sighting of Trumpeter Swans successfully nesting in Duck Mountain Provincial Park that we are aware of. In the previous two summers, Bob heard Trumpeter Swans in the vicinity of the same beaver pond, and speculates that this may not be the first summer they have nested there.

Thank you to everyone who accompanied me on my surveys (Nancy Welykholowa, Brian and MaryLou Deck, Sharon Korb and Kevin Streat) as well as the many individuals who called me regarding loons that they spotted over the summer. Again, a big thanks to Bob Wynes, who collaborated with me this year, and to Barb and Doug Elsasser, Shevon Wilson and Rob Wilson, who accompanied Bob on separate counts. Also, a big thank you to the Park and its staff for the support they provide me every year. Note that this year the Park deployed No Wake Zone buoys in front of cottages and the Jubilee Boat Launch. The latter covers one of our nesting sites, while the Kamsack Beach/Midway buoys cover another. These will be monitored in the future to gauge any significant effects on these two sites. 🦢