Common Loon: Past, Present and Future [TWS]

Lynn M. Kelly, President, Montana Loon Society
6525 Rocky Point Rd, Polson, MT 59860

Jane M. Ingebretson
Wildlife Biologist, Swan Lake Ranger District
Flathead National Forest, Bigfork, MT 59911

Gael N. Bissell
Wildlife Biologist, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Kalispell, MT 59901

National concern for common loons (*Gavia immer*) began in the 1970's following increased awareness about the effect of DDT on water birds. Early loon research helped define nesting and nursery habitat requirements, clutch and brood sizes, pair bond establishment, and general dates of spring arrival, nest initiation, and hatch. Between 1 980-1986, Montana researchers and volunteers defined the breeding range and breeding lake characteristics of loons. In 1986, the Montana Loon Society established the first systematic breeding survey or "Loon Day". Results showed that Montana supported a total of 180-220 common loons, including 35-40 chicks each summer. Between 1986 and 1992, researchers determined that human disturbances during the nesting season had a detrimental effect on breeding success of loons. MLS soon implemented a management program that relied on nest area closures using floating signs and public education at high use areas. Later, banding efforts determined that loons nesting in Montana wintered on the Pacific Coast and that blood-mercury levels in captured birds were minimal. The increase of human recreational and development activities on loon breeding lakes soon outpaced voluntary public education efforts. In response, recent management efforts include establishing a second loon survey in May, creating a statewide, standardized database, and funding Loon Ranger positions. In 200 1, Montana produced the highest number of loon chicks since 1981. Future statewide priorities will focus on completing the statewide database, procuring secure funding for the Loon Ranger program, and establishing a common loon population and contaminant/ mortality research program.