



The Living Room Loon

By Donna Love

In autumn things around Placid Lake in Northwest Montana, fifty miles north of Missoula, are pretty quiet for Lois Bellusci, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks campground host and lake resident. In summer things are bustling busy with vacationers and tourist. Come autumn about the only thing she and five other year round residents have to do is watch the tamarack turn yellow and wonder when the lake will freeze over. So last year on Saturday, September 14 during a routine campground check, she was curious when she came upon a man and woman carrying a large plastic tub from their car to the water's edge. She stopped and was surprised to see a big gray loon sitting in the tub. She listened intently to the loon's story.

Loonar Landing

Earlier that week, Missoula area resident, David Duncan, was returning home from business in Seattle cruising over Look Out Pass on Interstate 90 near the Montana/Idaho border. His trip had gone fairly well in spite of it being September 11, a year to the day since the collapse of the World Trade Center. Now in the final leg of his journey, he looked forward to being home with his wife and daughters. The afternoon road conditions and weather were good, the traffic moderate. As he flew past the Montana Department of Transportation weigh station near Haugan, seventeen miles east of St. Regis, a semi-truck pulled around him in the passing lane. As it sped by a fluff of feathers from a big bird flapped softly in the truck's tailwind on the ground near the center median. David slowed his car to take a closer look. The bird was alive, but in danger of being run over, its head lying across the yellow centerline. Seeing its long sharp bill, and just back from the coast, David initially thought it was a herring gull.

He didn't think about whether to stop or not. He just did. A lesson from his youth made helping instinctive. While growing up in Oregon he came upon a western grebe washed up on the beach by a storm. Not knowing what to do, and feeling the bird would die, he did nothing. Years later he related

the story to a birding friend and learned that if he'd taken the grebe to water it might have survived. Now he takes a more hopeful approach to life. When he can, he tries to help. In the past fifteen years he guesses that he and his family have rescued up to fifty stranded creatures of all shapes and sizes.

Now as he stopped, several more cars sped by, just missing the bird's head. He would have to hurry. He didn't have time to make a gentle retrieval. As he drew closer he could tell from its prehistoric-shape that it was a loon.

Common loons (*gavia immer*) are large, goose-size diving birds known for their haunting calls and striking black and white breeding plumage. Judging from this one's gray feathers, David surmised it had recently fledged and was on its way to its winter home on the Pacific coast. Careful of oncoming traffic David ran to the loon, threw his coat over it, and scooped it up in his arms carrying it like a baby. Returning to his car he laid the bundle of coat and bird on the back seat. Its strong struggling told him the bird probably hadn't been stranded long. When he uncovered the loon's head to check for



injuries, it gave a loud, mournful cry. To David it sounded like the loon thought it was doomed.

He wasn't sure how the chick came to be on the freeway, but the surrounding area provided clues. For several miles Interstate 90 follows the St. Regis River as it flows east from its headwaters near Look Out Pass. At the Haugan Exit, the river spreads wide on both sides of the highway slowed by beaver dams and low gradient, meandering through a wide canyon. The loon may have flown low over the freeway in an attempt to land, or it may have been feeding, flying low from one side of the highway to the other, when it was nicked by a passing car or frightened down in a near miss. Once on the ground the loon was stranded. A loon is a heavy bird for its wing size so it can't take off from land. It achieves lift-off by running into the wind across the surface of the water so even if the bird wasn't hurt, it couldn't take off.

David wedged the bird, still wrapped in his coat, on the floor between the front and back seat of his car to keep the bird safe. Talking to the frightened animal seemed to calm it so he alternately talked and sang his way to Missoula. In town he pulled over to check on it. At the sight of light it called again, a cry strangely bizarre in the asphalt-city. David re-secured the bird, and even though he was close to home, pulled onto the freeway again, drove past Missoula to Bonner and turned north on Highway 200. He was taking the loon to bird rehabilitator, Cher Downs; a friend made during previous stranded animal adventures. He dialed her Potomac number on his cell phone and left the message that he would soon be delivering a loon.

Bird Bath

Cher didn't receive the message so when David arrived she was curious about the large bundle in his arms. When she saw it was a loon she was surprised, but a bird is a bird, and she immediately began to examine it. Seeing that the loon was in good hands, David left for home. He had quite the story to tell his family.

Not a wildlife biologist, Cher learned about animals through experience. Originally from Philipsburg, she raised four children on a ranch in Potomac. She feels that being part Blackfoot Indian on her grandmother's side, contributes to her kinship with animals. For the past year she has

helped operate Wolfkeep, a non-profit wolf sanctuary in Potomac. In April of 2002 she received her bird rehabilitation license from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Her aviary currently houses several birds in various stages of rehabilitation.

During her examination, Cher found the loon to be a healthy 12 pounds and 20 inches long from chest to tail. It didn't seem to be injured so it didn't warrant a veterinarian's care, though it was missing a quarter-inch tip of its upper bill, which might have been chipped off in its crash landing. As she had been trained, she filed the ragged edge of the broken bill smooth and sealed it with epoxy. A loon's bill is made from keratin, the same substance that fingernails are made of. If a part of a bird's bill breaks off it will slowly grow back.

While Cher worked she wondered how she would keep the loon for observation, the next step in the bird rehabilitation process. Her aviary was set up for songbirds and raptors, not water birds. Carl Bock, her partner and creator of Wolfkeep solved her problem. He set one of the wolves' large, watering tubs on her living room floor, filled it with water and added the loon. The bird perked right up when its feet hit the water. Made for swimming and diving, a loon's legs are situated far back on its body. This makes the loon awkward on land. In water the loon is as graceful as a swan.

Feeling the familiarity of the water, the young loon immediately began to preen, splashing water on the living floor with the abandon of a child playing in a wading pool. Cher smiled in spite of the situation. A loon in her living room wasn't what she'd envisioned when she became a bird rehabilitator, and it certainly wasn't where the young loon thought it would be, but if it was disappointed with its new home it gave no indication. In fact, the loon took to the water with ease, paddling this way and that, inspecting its new three and a half-foot long oblong home. Cher gave a shiver of excitement. She had dealt with raptors and songbirds, and even a raven before, but never a loon. It was hard to tear herself away, but she had work to do. She needed to become an expert on loons and she needed to become one fast. At her computer, she clicked on the Internet and typed in "loon."

Cher learned that loons are fish eaters so she tried feeding the bird smelt from her freezer, which she keeps on hand for raptors. At first the chick wouldn't eat so she wiggled a small one in front of its bill. Intrigued, it cocked its head to one side and comically looked the fish over. Then it grabbed the fish as it might from its parents and with a toss of its bill swallowed it whole. It ate several. After its fish dinner the loon slept. It had had a rough day. Towards early morning it became active again, but in Cher's animal world, a loon splashing around in her living room wasn't something to lose sleep over.

The next day Cher had a surprise for the loon. She put several feeder goldfish in its tank and hid behind a doorway to watch what would happen. It didn't take long for the young bird to spot the golden slivers of light flashing at the bottom of the tub. Birds have good eyesight, their strongest sense. Soon the loon was darting after the goldfish, swimming this way and that. Now it was easy to care for the loon. Cher only needed to keep a close eye on it for it had learned how to climb out of the tub by flapping its wings and crawling over the rounded sides.

Cher wasn't sure how long she should keep the loon, but on the evening of the third day, an event happened that told her it was time for release. The ten wolves in their nine-acre enclosure just outside her door began to howl. This excited the chick and it swam in circles with its head held high. After a few moments of intense listening the loon answered with a wilderness wail of its own. It was time to return the bird to the wilds.

Where the Wild Things Are

On Saturday she and Brian "Bird" Starling, a helper at Wolfkeep, put the loon in a blanketed, plastic carrying tote and headed north on Highway 83. They were going to release the loon on Placid Lake, ten miles south of the community of Seeley Lake in the Seeley-Swan Valley. Cher chose that lake for several reasons. It wasn't too far away, she had heard that loons were there, and the lake was secluded from the main highway. Before transporting the loon she tried to band the chick for future identification, but her bands were too small for its large ankle. She didn't know about the Montana Loon Society, the State's volunteer loon organization, so she didn't know who to contact concerning the bird.

Releasing rehabilitated animals always brought a mixture of emotions. Happiness over the health

of the creature is weighed against the angst of letting it go. In the end, knowing the critter belonged in the wilds overcame the desire to keep it safe forever. Cher set the young loon near the water's edge and said goodbye, confident that it would fare well on pretty Placid Lake. The loon wasn't in a hurry to leave. Enjoying its new bigger home, it swam close to shore and flapped its wings. Slowly it moved further away and with a final look around, dove from sight. Cher heaved a satisfied sigh.

Lois came upon them during the release and offered to report on the young loon's progress. The loon stayed in the general area of its release, a marshy cove where a pair of loons used to nest. Victims of increasing water recreation and shoreline development, the pair last nested there in 1998. Another pair still nested on the north end of the lake near the inlet of Placid Creek. That pair had just fledged two chicks. Lois was able to tell the living room loon from the resident loons because the family stayed together on the far side of the lake. Lois reported that the living room loon hung around into November, long after the other loon family migrated, and then it was gone.

Did the lucky, living room loon make it to its winter ocean home this time?
Everyone likes to think so.

According to Lynn Kelly, wildlife biologist, educator, and president of the Montana Loon Society, about 200 common loons (*gavia immer*) make their home in Montana each summer where approximately thirty pairs hatch and raise one to two chicks a year. Results from bandings in 1996 and 1997 reveal that Montana's migrating loons follow waterways to the Pacific Ocean where the birds winter off the coast of California. This young bird could have been one of Montana's own or it might have migrated south from Canada.

Kelly guessed that since loons migrate in small, loose flocks it is possible that it was traveling with other loons at the time of its crash landing. The migrating birds land on water at night to rest and feed. In states where loons and people are plentiful, a loon sometimes lands on roads or parking lots mistaking them for water. The ancient bird is heavy for its wing size so it is unable to take off without a water runway. If you happen upon a stranded loon, and it isn't hurt, Kelly recommends taking it to a large body of slow moving water where it can recuperate and be on its way, like this young, living room loon.

Donna Love is a free-lance writer from Seeley Lake, Montana where she is a volunteer Loon Watcher and Secretary for the Montana Loon Society. Her annual "Loon Watch" appears in the Seeley-Swan Pathfinder each May. Her children's book, "Loons, Diving Birds of the North" being published by Mountain Press in Missoula, is due out in summer of 2003.



A bird rehabilitator in Potomac, Cher Downs.