



Montana Loon Society 2026 Newsletter

Loon Banding

The Why and How of it All

By **Jami Belt**, *Glacier National Park biologist and Common Loon Working Group co-chair*

It's hard to believe as I write this on a snowy winter day that spring will be here before we know it. With spring comes the return of our beloved loons as they migrate from their ocean wintering grounds to Montana's breeding lakes. This phenomenon raises many questions that are critical to successful loon conservation, such as: Where did our loons spend their winter? Which loon pairs survived and stayed with their mates? Where do our young loons go when they are ready to establish their own breeding territory? The only way we can begin answering these questions is to have a way to uniquely identify a portion of our loons by capturing them and marking them with distinctively colored bands on their legs.

Biologists from the Common Loon Working Group and Biodiversity Research Institute have



Biologists work by headlamps at night to band an adult loon

been capturing and placing leg bands on loons in northwest Montana since 1996. Captures occur at night with researchers using three essential tools: a spotlight, a dip net, and imitation loon chick calls. Banding in Montana happens only after chicks are hatched to avoid disturbing loons on their nest sites. For a visual look at how banding works, watch this video [\(20\) Glacier Science Videos - Loon Banding \(Audio Described\) - YouTube](#). During capture, biologists can assess the loon for contaminants such as mercury and diseases and evaluate their health through physiological measurements. Each loon is then banded with four bands (two per leg), using a combination of three color bands and one metal USFWS band.

In 2025, biologists Jami Belt from Glacier National Park and Carl Brown from the Biodiversity Research Institute led the banding effort for the Montana Common Loon Working Group, a consor-

tium of agencies and partners that focus on loon conservation. They attempted banding on four lakes across northwest Montana. Two loons were successfully captured and banded, one adult and one chick. Both birds represented exciting firsts. After



A biologist hauls banding gear up the trail to a remote lake

multiple attempts, we were finally successful this year at banding a loon on a backcountry lake in Glacier National Park, a difficult feat due to the extreme wariness of these less habituated loons. Having a banded loon at this remote lake will help us learn more about the valuable restoration of the native fisheries food web and how it affects loons.

The second bird we banded was a leucistic loonlet. Leucism is an abnormality in the deposition of pigment in the feathers which can be genetic or caused by damage to pigment cells during development. It will be interesting to see if this bird survives to adulthood and returns to the area in three years. In the meantime, the chick has begun its first big journey and was spotted in January on a reservoir outside

Boise, Idaho! (For more on this chick and leucism, please see article on p. 2.)



Biologists hold out the right leg of the leucistic loonlet after banding

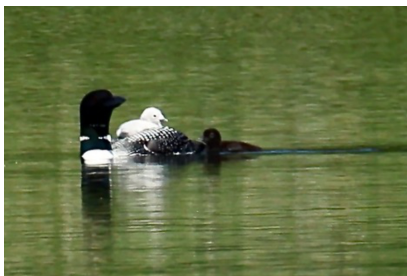
You can contribute to solving loon mysteries by looking for color bands on loons and reporting them to the Montana Loon Society or an area coordinator from the Common Loon Working Group. To see leg bands on loons, watch them until they either preen or do a "leg-flap."

Note which colors are on which legs and what color is closer to the foot of each leg. *(Cont'd p. 9)*

The Tale of a Leucistic Loon Chick Rarity In Our Midst

By **Brittany Watling**, Flathead National Forest
wildlife technician and
Montana Loon Society Secretary

On May 29, a report was received by the wildlife department at Flathead National Forest's Tally Lake Ranger District office describing an unusual sighting on Skyles Lake, just outside of Whitefish, Montana: an all-white Common Loon chick. Common Loons typically hatch two downy chicks, both jet black in coloration. This dark plumage provides critical camouflage, protecting the vulnerable young from aerial predators such as eagles and helps provide thermal heat in the cool waters.



Adult with leucistic chick on back and normally pigmented chick in water. Photo by Scott Crandell

Upon arrival at the lake, observers noted the white chick riding on a parent's back, common behavior that offers warmth and protection during the earliest days of life. The chick soon slipped into the water paddling briefly while the second adult delivered a small fish. Even at first glance, questions arose about the chick's likelihood of survival. Its pale plumage seemed almost fluorescent against the water's surface, rendering it conspicuous in stark contrast to its well-camouflaged sibling, who nearly disappeared against the dark reflections of the lake.



Leucistic chick visible on the water while the normally pigmented chick hides on adult's back. Photo by Scott Crandell

It became clear this was an exceptionally rare occurrence. Data from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Project FeederWatch, which compiled roughly 5.5 million bird observations each year from 2000-2007, show that only about 236 reports per year involve birds with unusual plumage, such as leucism or the even rarer albinism – an estimated rate of roughly 1 in 30,000 birds. Although certain species, including blackbirds, exhibit abnormal plumage more frequently, such cases remain exceedingly uncommon overall.

By June 1, both chicks were observed swimming

alongside one parent while the other parent foraged tirelessly to meet the demands of two growing fledglings. As the white chick matured, faint grey markings began to appear, indicating the bird was leucistic rather than albino. This conclusion was further supported by the chick's eye coloration. Unlike albino animals, which lack all melanin and therefore display reddish eyes due to visible blood vessels, this chick retained normal pigmentation in its eyes.

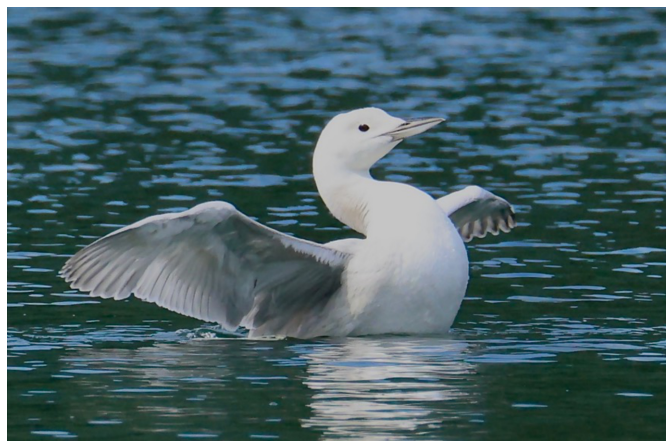
During the July Loon Day count, the adult pair continued to successfully rear both chicks, each visibly healthy and steadily growing. The white chick remained strikingly conspicuous, while its darker sibling blended into the water nearby, the two gradually mastering the essential skills of diving, fishing, and navigating life as Common Loons.

In late July, the white chick was banded by the Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Although Common Loons typically do not return to breeding territories for two to five years, there is hope that this rare individual may one day be observed again on nearby Montana waters.



The chick shows off the bands on its left leg on August 3. Photo by Scott Crandell

“It was a privilege to monitor this loon's growth and behavior. You don't have to travel far to witness something extraordinary here—the landscape is filled with remarkable beauty.” -Brittany Watling



Lightly pigmented feathers clearly visible by August 3. Photo by Scott Crandell

(Cont'd p. 9)

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

By MLS President Lynn Kelly

I smile at the memories that have collected during 40 years of work promoting coexistence between



*Lynn Presents Donna Love
with a parting gift*

Common Loons and people living on their lakes in northwest Montana. It is an incredible privilege and a humbling honor to look back and see what has happened during this time, thanks to so many people! While many names come to mind, chief among them is Donna Love who retired as secretary of the Montana Loon Society in July 2025 after 27 years of incredible service to loons and the people involved with these beauties of the northern lakes.

Donna moved to Seeley Lake in 1995 when her husband, Tim, became the Lolo National Forest's Seeley Lake District Ranger. That first summer she wondered what was making all that racket on the lake! The next spring I bumped into the Love family as they were taking an evening stroll to the wildlife viewing blind where I was observing an incubating loon. All the family members gazed with curiosity through the scope and then Donna volunteered to monitor that nest. That marked the beginning of a beautiful friendship between the Loves, the loons, and me. In 1997, at the annual meeting of the fledgling Montana Loon Society (MLS) I asked Donna to take the minutes and the rest, as they say, is history!

In the following years, as many of us did the seasonal work of finding nests, placing floating buoys around nests and educating people at boat ramps and homeowners' meetings around northwest Montana, Donna quietly assembled the infrastructure of MLS and then worked year-round, tending to all manner of loon-related communications and projects. She carefully executed all the duties of secretary and before each annual meeting, developed a half-inch thick folder for each board member containing all the records and correspondence for that year. "Just for fun," she graphically displayed various aspects of MLS finances and included them for us to study.

Donna worked on many other essential, but non-

secretarial, tasks such as producing an annual multi-paged newsletter, developing the means of tracking memberships, arranging website creation and maintenance, monitoring the monies raised from the sale of the MLS license plate and keeping myself and treasurer Don Skaar up to speed. As an artist, writer and educator, Donna was a key participant in the vital education prong of MLS as she wrote articles about loon subjects for the Seeley Lake newspaper, developed many types of educational materials to be used by loon rangers (wildlife interns) as they interacted with the public at boat ramps, and created coloring books that taught children about loons for schools and various wildlife festivals. (See page 14 for a fun example!) She participated in the annual Loon and Fish Festival at Seeley Lake by designing t-shirts as well as leading loon tours so folks could see a nesting loon or new chicks.

Donna and FS biologist Amy Jacobs (now retired) created original loon games/activities, gathered posters, books and audiovisual presentations to create four loon trunks for use in western Montana classrooms. Then Donna helped train teachers to use the materials in the trunk. On top of all that, Donna has authored 13 children's books, two of which were about loons. Check them out at donnalove.co.

"Executive Director" of MLS would have been a more fitting description for Donna's work along with a salary that would have been completely inadequate given all that she accomplished for Montana loons. Suffice to say the above list is not complete and MLS ran out of awards to give her to show our appreciation. When MLS board member Tony Dawson learned of Donna's retirement he spoke for all of us when he wrote: "In my forty years or so of involvement with nonprofits and boards I've noticed that there often seems to be one person that takes upon themselves a greater role in the organization. You all have probably seen that too. Someone who keeps the gears turning, makes sure everyone has the right information, covers the bases when no one else seems to, etcetera. However, I can honestly say that I have NEVER known a board member that has handled as much as Donna. Never. And she handles it all very well. The rest of us as MLS board members are going to have difficult shoes to fill going forward. A MLS without a "Donna" gives me anxiety! We have our work cut out for us, folks. Thank you Donna for your commitment and dedication to the MLS for so many years. You deserve our praise AND you deserve a break 😊. We won't be the same without you."

On February 25, 2026 I had the honor of presenting to Donna the gorgeous loon (Cont'd p. 9)

Montana Loon Society

Winter Loon Identification



Photo courtesy of Jake Bramante

During the fall and winter months loons can be much more challenging to identify. Nearly all the species expected to occur replace their flashy breeding plumages for shades of white, gray, brown, and black making size, structure, and plumage important in identification. These helpful tips may help in identification of wintering loons. Banner photo Common Loon (left) and Red-throated Loon (right).

Common Loon

- Most likely loon species to be found
- Large size, large blocky head
- Large bill, colors vary but often pale gray with dark tones. Non-breeding adults often have dark tips, early spring individuals may show pale tip as they molt into breeding plumage
- White/pale around the eye
- Jagged pattern along the neck of dark and paler plumage

Common Loon. Photo courtesy of Jake Bramante ▶



Pacific Loon

- Bill straight and narrow and even sized upper and lower bill
- Head has smoother and rounder shape than Common
- Dark plumage around the eye, contrasting white lower face
- Straight pattern along the neck of dark and paler plumage, contrasting sharply, may show distinct chin strap
- Back often appears less patterned than other species

Pacific Loon. Photo courtesy of Clayton Peoples ▶



Red-throated Loon

- Small and slender size
- Head often peaked in the rear
- Distinctive thin bill and often held upwards
- Wintering adult contrasting white and dark plumage
- Speckled back (wintering adult)
- Juvenile gray streaking and less contrast in plumage

Non-breeding Adult Red-throated Loon. Photo Roy Morris ▶



Yellow-billed Loon

- Large overall size, large blocky head
- Large bill, lower mandible angles upward to the tip
- Bill color pale bone-like beige color; beware of Common Loons with pale gray bills
- Juveniles often show obvious pale barring pattern on the back
- Pale face mixed with brown, often has brown spot on ear coverts

Yellow-billed Loon. Photo Roy Morris ▶



Montana Loon Society

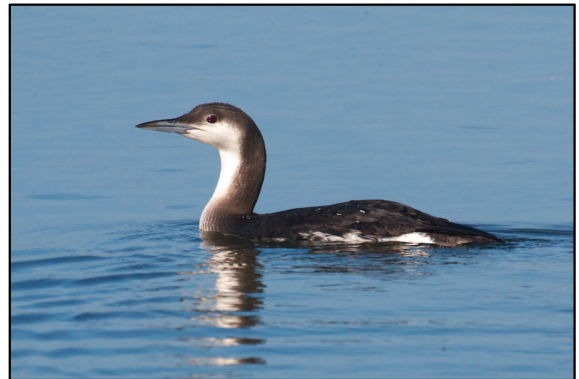
Winter Loon Identification



Photo courtesy of Jake Bramante

Arctic Loon

- Rarest loon species in North America, winters primarily in coastal waters
- Key feature large white flank patches flaring up the sides wrapping up the rear nearly to the tail, visible on above the waterline. Other loons white underparts and belly are an even horizontal line and often seen while rolling to the side or preening.
- Longer thicker bill than Pacific, and structurally closer to Common Loon in size, and may hold head upward like Red-throated Loon & Yellow-billed Loon.
- Straight pattern along the neck of dark and paler plumage, contrasting sharply, lower face and ear coverts often white



Arctic Loon. © Ed Harper; Cornell Lab of Ornithology | Macaulay Library

Other species that may often be mistaken for Loons

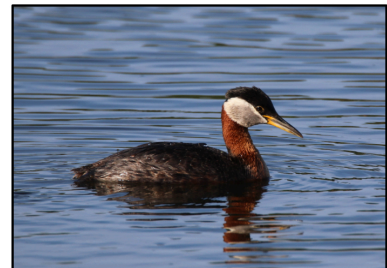
Western Grebe, Clark's Grebe, and Red-necked Grebe



Western Grebe. Photo courtesy of Jason Wilder.

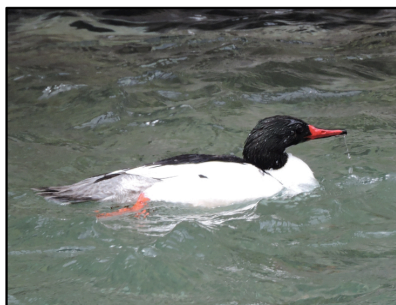


Clark's Grebe. Photo Roy Morris

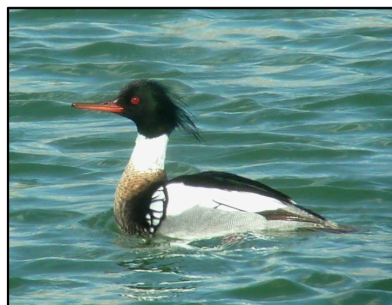


Red-necked Grebe. Photo Roy Morris

Common Merganser, Red-breasted Merganser, and Double-crested Cormorant



Common Merganser. Photo courtesy of Dan Casey.



Red-breasted Merganser. Photo courtesy of Dan Casey.



Double-crested Cormorant. Photo Roy Morris

2025 AREA LOON REPORTS

"Area Loon Reports" are written by Common Loon Working Group (CLWG) area coordinators and wildlife biologists (and/or loon rangers) in the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), Glacier National Park (GNP), Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (MFWP), Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes (CSKT), Blackfoot Tribe, and the Blackfoot Challenge. Many individuals representing these agencies and other groups, including MLS, monitor Montana's loons. Chicks counted on Loon Day in July are assumed to have survived to migrate in the fall. The following summaries are greatly condensed versions of longer reports. To obtain full-length loon reports please contact the Common Loon Working Group at: montanaloonworkinggroup@gmail.com.

Blackfoot Tribal Lands

Dee Baginski, GNP wildlife technician

The Piikuni Lands Service Corps, a crew of Blackfoot Tribal members in partnership with Montana Conservation Corps, surveyed 10 lakes on the Blackfoot Indian Tribal Land. This work was completed in collaboration with GNP's Citizen Science staff and volunteers. The Babb Beaver Pond had two chicks hatch this year, but only one was reported during July Loon Day. Additional surveys later also showed just one chick. This year they surveyed Duck, Kipps, Twins, Four Horn, Hidden, Green, Big Spring, Mitten, Lower St. Mary, and Lower Two Medicine Lakes. A private landowner reported two chicks on Gretchen's Mirror. **Three chicks survived to July Loon Day.**

Blackfoot (Ovando Area)

Elaine Caton, Blackfoot Challenge

We surveyed 13 lakes in the Ovando/Helmville area in 2025. Pairs were documented on five lakes (Upsata, Shoup, Jones, Cooper, and Doney Reservoir), and pairs were incubating during May Loon Day on Upsata and Shoup. There was also an intruder loon documented on Upsata during the survey. The nest on Upsata failed for unknown reasons in late May, and the pair on Shoup raised a brood of two. A pair was consistently on Jones throughout the summer, but loons appeared sporadically on Doney Reservoir and Cooper Lake. Landowners around Cooper Lake reported concerns about loons and other waterfowl being disturbed by motorboats. A landowner sent a video of an apparently leucistic loon on the lake in late July. **Two chicks survived to July Loon Day.**

Bob Marshall Wilderness Complex

BMWC loons and nest info is greatly appreciated. (Loon calls count, too!) To report sightings, contact

the nearest Forest Service Ranger Station. Nesting info is especially needed for Big Salmon Lake. Please contact the Hungry Horse Ranger Station if you have relevant nesting information

Clearwater (Seeley Lake area)

No area summary available. CLWG reports **four chicks survived to July Loon Day.**

Eastern Front Rocky Mountain Ranger District

No area summary available. CLWG reports no nesting attempts and **no chicks on July Loon Day.**

Flathead Basin #2 (DNRC lakes in North Flathead and North Fork)

Vicki Forristal, DNRC wildlife biologist

DNRC monitored nine lakes in the Stillwater State Forest and North Fork area. At Boyle, Murray, and Little Beaver Lakes we observed nesting loons. Unfortunately, they all failed. Pairs of loons were seen at Beaver, Meadow, and Cyclone Lakes; however, no nesting was detected on those lakes. The pair of loons on Meadow Lake were not seen during the July Loon Day; however, two cygnets were observed on this lake during that time. Single loons were spotted on Woods and Dollar Lakes. Favorable spring conditions allowed for a visit to Upper Whitefish Lake on May Loon Day. Instead of finding ice on the lake that is typical in May, we found a pair of loons! This pair was successful in hatching two chicks that were seen on July Loon Day! We believe these are the first chicks on Upper Whitefish Lake since 2002. An interesting incidental observation was a single loon repeatedly seen on the 6-acre lake by The Springs in Whitefish. **Two chicks survived to July Loon Day.**

Flathead River-Forks

Katie Kegley, USFS biologist

Eight lakes were monitored in the Flathead River Forks area in 2025. Although it was not monitored, an incidental observation of an adult loon and chick on Hungry Horse Reservoir means a total of nine breeding lakes for the season. Of these nine lakes, seven loon pairs attempted to nest. Nests failed on Lion, Spoon, Teepee, and Stanton lakes. Hungry Horse Reservoir, Cedar Creek Reservoir, and Mud Lake had successful nest attempts. The pair on Mud Lake hatched two chicks but lost one during the first week in July. The Cedar Creek Reservoir pair successfully hatched two chicks, and we suspect this was the pair's second nest attempt of the season. Unfortunately, no nesting attempts were observed at Halfmoon Lake or Lake Five. **Three chicks survived to July Loon Day.**

(Cont'd next page)

(2025 Area Loon Reports Cont'd)

Flathead Indian Reservation

Cara Thompson, CKST wildlife biologist

Water bodies on the Flathead Indian Reservation and Flathead Lake are important staging areas for migrating loons that are regularly seen in spring and fall. Twenty-eight sites were surveyed in May and July 2025, including irrigation reservoirs, mountain lakes, and 13 locations on the south half of Flathead Lake. Eight loons were detected this year. Pairs of loons were recorded at Twin Lakes and off Finley Point/Bird Island on Flathead Lake. Single loons were recorded at Lower Jocko Lake, Twin Lakes, and in Yellow Bay on Flathead Lake. Primarily adults (and occasionally Stage 4+ juveniles in their first migration) are observed on the Reservation, but no territories or nests have been located. Fluctuations in reservoir water levels due to irrigation and hydroelectric needs pose a challenge to nesting loons and past nesting attempts have failed because of this. Floating platforms have not been successful in mitigating drastic water level changes.

Glacier National Park

Dee Baginski, GNP wildlife technician

We surveyed 43 of 45 loon lakes with the help of our Citizen Science Volunteers in Glacier National Park during a very wet Loon Day weekend. There were five successful nesting pairs resulting in nine total chicks reported in the park with a 100 percent survival rate for the season. Winona (formerly Mud) and Trout Lake each hatched two chicks. Doverspike and Upper Howe each had one chick. Logging Lake had three chicks in two broods, two chicks at the foot of the lake and one chick at the head of the lake. There were two nest failures in the North Fork region: Lower and Middle Quartz. The Lower Quartz nest was detected by a backcountry ranger, and the Park placed a closure on the trail section near the backcountry campground. The Middle Quartz nest failed for unknown reasons. The nest was detected on May 18 and several surveys after July Loon Day show the pair without chicks.

Swiftcurrent and Josephine Lakes were the only known nesting attempts east of the Continental Divide within Glacier's boundaries, where nesting success has never been verified. The trail around Swiftcurrent was closed this year due to a construction project. The loon was spotted sitting on the shore near the public boat launch on June 11th by a wildlife technician. The nest buoys were placed around the area on June 12th with the help of the Glacier Park Boat Company. The Swiftcurrent loons were never seen on the nest after June 11th.

The Josephine Lake nest was reported on June 10th by a wildlife technician. The nest was close to a popular trail, and a closure was placed at the public beach access to minimize disturbance on June 12th. The loons were spotted incubating for about two weeks before they abandoned the nest. The nest was declared failed on July 17th when Biologist Jami Belt waded over to the nest location and found broken eggshells. The nest is thought to have been predated. This was the first reported nesting attempt on Lake Josephine. **Nine chicks survived to July Loon Day.**

Kalispell West

Cole Kimzey, MT FWP technician

Cole monitored 19 lakes in the Kalispell West area and calculated 13 territorial pairs present. Nesting was observed but failed at three lakes (Island Lake south, Lower Thompson Lake, and Upper Thompson Lake East). Nesting was successful at Little McGregor, Upper Thompson Middle, and Notellum Lakes. Notellum Lake is a newly discovered territory this year. It is a very small lake and adults are likely feeding at nearby McGregor Lake. **Four chicks survived to July Loon Day.**

Ksanka Ranger District (Eureka, Fortine, and Murphy Lake areas)

Lauren Michelsen, USFS wildlife biologist

With much help from volunteers, all lakes were surveyed, with buoys deployed on Dickey, Carpenter/Tetrault, Murphy and Bull Lakes. Nesting platforms were successful on both Lick and Dickey with a successful hatch on Bull Lake but no surviving chick. Crystal Lakes loons nested once unsuccessfully. Murphy Lake hatched one chick from two eggs, with one egg found abandoned on the nest. The resident pair was not active on Carpenter Lake and may have moved north to Moran Lake, where a single chick was reared.

Dickey lake had two resident pairs attempting to nest. The south pair used the platform, but the north pair struggled to find native habitat in which to nest. Therefore, a platform was deployed in a moderately quiet bay on the west side of the lake. The pair did not use the platform and no other nesting attempts were observed. Early August we were alerted of a dead loon decomposing at the south end of Dickey Lake. August 5th the deceased loon was retrieved and sent to MT FWP for necropsy.

A group of roughly 60 first graders participated in an "All about Loons" field trip in which a loon education truck was used to give a presentation, dress a student in a loon costume, and create loon necklaces. **Four chicks survived to July Loon Day on Dickey, Murphy, Lick and Moran Lakes.**

(Cont'd next page)

(2025 Area Loon Reports Cont'd)

Libby Ranger District/Libby

No information is available from this area. MLS and the CLWG are seeking volunteers to survey lakes in the Libby area on May and July Loon Days. Volunteers do not have to be members of MLS. Both MLS and the CLWG are willing to provide volunteer training.

Lower Clark Fork Area (Cabinet Ranger District) *Ron Torretta, USFS wildlife biologist*

Two lakes (Sylvan and Miller) and one bay (Stevens Creek) were monitored during the July Loon Day in the Lower Clark Fork area. No May surveys were conducted due to reduced staffing levels. **No loons were observed on July Loon Day.**

Swan Geographic Area

Roy Morris, USFS wildlife biologist

Nine lakes in the region were monitored. The area had four lakes with breeding pairs this season, and two additional lakes that had pairs that did not attempt breeding. Three of the four lakes were successful with one chick early on Loon Lake (Ferndale), two chicks on Loon Lake (Kraft Creek Rd), and two chicks on Pierce Lake. Unfortunately, the chick on Loon Lake (Ferndale) did not survive. However, it was the first season of successful breeding with the new platform nest on Pierce Lake and both chicks were observed throughout the summer. **Four chicks survived to July Loon Day.**

Tally Lake/Stillwater Area

Brittany Watling, USFS wildlife technician

The 2025 Loon surveys on Tally Lake Ranger District encompassed sixteen lakes, including Ashley Lake, where monitoring efforts were conducted primarily by homeowner Tony Dawson.

Among the lakes surveyed, Hole in the Wall, Lupine, and Sylvia consistently exhibited little to no loon activity throughout the season. The remaining 13 lakes were all inhabited by potential breeding pairs, Ashley Lake being home to three said pairs due to its size and available food and nesting resources.

While the district contained 15 potential pairs, the birds at Lower Stillwater, Dog Lake, and Tally Lake were never documented to have nesting behavior, meaning we had 12 breeding pairs. Three of these pairs failed: Bootjack, Blanchard, and Ashley East. Pleasantly, this was the first year Lagoni successfully nested and fledged one chick. While the pair was seen on shore last year trying to build a nest, no nesting was ever observed and there are no previous records of this pair nesting dating back to 2002.

A noteworthy event this year occurred on Skyles Lake where an extremely rare leucistic chick was observed. While initially all white, the chick has begun to show faint grey markings as it matures. The chick was successfully banded July 25th and efforts will continue to monitor its development in the future seasons.

Overall, nine pairs hatched 16 chicks, lost five throughout the season and ended with 11 healthy chicks across the district. Thirty-two adults were counted during our July Loon Day surveys. **Eleven chicks survived to July Loon Day.**

Three Rivers Ranger District/Troy

No information was available from this area at the time of printing. MLS and the CLWG are seeking volunteers to survey lakes in the Troy area on the May and July Loon Days. Volunteers do not have to be members of MLS. Both MLS and the CLWG are willing to provide volunteer training.

Troy Area

No area summary available. CLWG reports **three chicks survived to July Loon Day.** ♦

Total 2025 Montana Loon Chicks

49 chicks are reported in this newsletter that were counted during the 2025 July Loon Day, which includes nine chicks in Glacier National Park. Discrepancies between this number and that in the CLWG report are due to their data still being preliminary. Here's a look back at recent chick numbers reported in the newsletter.

2024—48 chicks	2022—48 chicks
2023—51 chicks	2021—52 chicks

Thanks to our loon rangers and volunteers our loon numbers continue to hold steady. ♦

To Become A Loon Volunteer **Contact**

montanaloonworkinggroup@gmail.com

OR

montanaloonsociety@gmail.com

(Banding - continued from page 1)

If at all possible, please also take a photo of the bands, even if it is not the highest quality, as that can help us verify the observation. Getting reports



A closer look at the two bands on a loon's leg

back from observers who see color-banded birds allows for identification of individual birds from a distance and it can give us critical information about dispersal, site and mate fidelity, age, and health of our Common Loons. When volunteers report a re-sighting of banded loons it also gives researchers insight into the movement patterns of specific individuals.

See pages 12-13 of this newsletter for more details on reading and reporting bands, as well as how you might win a prize! We also highly encourage you to report your band sightings of banded loons (or any banded birds) at reportband.gov.

For more information about Common Loon banding check out Glacier National Park's Crown of the Continent Learning Center Story Map at <https://www.nps.gov/rlc/crown/storymaps.htm> and scroll down to "Loons on the Edge." ♦

(Leucistic Loon - continued from page 2)

As the upcoming season approaches, it is important to remember the sensitivity of loons to human disturbance. Loons are among the species most vulnerable to stress, particularly during nesting and chick rearing periods. While some pairs may appear tolerant of human presence, excessive disturbance can threaten their survival. When encountering loons on the water, a mindful approach is essential: maintain distance (at least 200 feet), move calmly and slowly away, and minimize boat wake near shoreline nesting sites. Excessive wake can flood the nest and significantly reduce success. Anglers can also play a vital role in loon conservation by switching to non-lead tackle. Lead sinkers and weights, often mistaken for pebbles that loons ingest to aid digestion, can be fatal if consumed. Please keep specific breeding lake locations off public forums.

To report loon sightings and for additional information about conservation efforts, go to:

<https://montanaloons.org/>

For more on albinism and leucism in birds, see: <https://avianreport.com/how-rare-leucistic-albino-birds/> ♦

(President's Corner - continued from page 3)

portrait entitled "In the Swim of Things" by Carl Brenders, pictured at the start of this article. This original "mixed media on canvas" features a loon with two chicks among cattails and water lilies... a nearly perfect replica of the scene in that backwater marsh on the north end of Seeley Lake that captured Donna's heart 30 years ago.

Thank you, Donna, from the loons and the people who love them.

"May the road rise up to meet you, may the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face, the rains fall soft upon your fields. And until we meet again, may God hold you in the hollow of His hand." -Traditional Irish Blessing ♦

A Cautionary Word About Waterlilies

Tris Hoffman, Flathead National Forest

noxious weed coordinator



If you are boating this summer and encounter a beautiful waterlily with fragrant white blossoms, be forewarned that it is not our friend. American white waterlily is native to the eastern states, but this invader is not welcome in Montana because it "engineers" habitat to its own liking: low oxygen, low diversity, low light (under its floating leaves). It squeezes out competing native plants and degrades water quality. This is likely to adversely affect fish, especially those accustomed to cold water lakes. Loons depend on fish as their primary food source.

Several native waterlilies occur in Montana, but they look quite different. Native lilies have oblong leaves that are green on both sides, small fleshy flowers that may be yellow/red (commonly) or white/green (rarely) with few petals. Invasive waterlilies have round leaves that are reddish underneath and large, many-petaled bright white flowers reminiscent of a Japanese painting.

It is their beauty and fragrance that have encouraged people to plant them in Montana waters. However, they spread rapidly with strong rhizomes and are difficult to remove once established. Do not plant non-native species; choose only native plants. The fish and loons thank you!

2025 MLS Partner of the Year

Mark Ruby



The 2025 *Partner of the Year Award* goes to Mark Ruby for his hard work and dedication to loon conservation in spite of having many other duties in the course of his employment.

Mark was born and raised in Kalispell, MT and has been privileged to maintain a small home range while building his career on the Flathead National Forest as a wildlife biologist. His work with loons began as a loon ranger while attending the University of Montana; an experience that continues to resonate with him 20 years later.

Working first as a wildlife biologist in the Swan District and now as the forest's wildlife program manager, Mark has experience specializing in forest carnivores, bear management, and loon conservation. A member of MLS since 2005, he served 15 years on the MLS board, retiring in 2025.

“Working with loons and the people that care about them has taught me so much about the connection between our wildlife and the people that steward them. These lessons still help me to this day.”

Through his leadership and partnership, Mark has played a vital role in loon conservation and continues to make an impact in our local forests. We cannot thank him enough for his time spent with the Montana Loon Society and his years of dedication to helping Montana's loons. ♦

2025 MLS Volunteer of the Year

Robin "Bobbie" Williams



Bobbie with her husband, Rob

2025 *Volunteer of the Year Award* was presented to Bobbie Williams for outstanding dedication to the protection and preservation of our local loon population. Bobbie has played a vital role in the successful nesting efforts on Hanson-Doyle Lake, contributing significantly to the well-being of the resident loon pair.

Through consistent communication and education, she has helped neighbors and lake users understand the importance of giving the nesting loons the space and respect they need to thrive. In addition, Bobbie has spent many hours on the water, actively monitoring and helping safeguard the pair from potential predators.

Bobbie loves the beautiful birds and their varied calls. "I look forward to their arrival each spring—especially the “Sheriff”, the large male who dominates the lake, including ducks, geese, and people. He's very intimidating and is such a great protector of his chicks."

Her commitment and passion have directly supported the successful fledging of three chicks over the past two years, including last year's first recorded nesting success. Her devotion to these birds has made a lasting impact on their continued survival. Thank you, Bobbie, for your exemplary service and dedication. ♦

MLS Educational Loon Trunks Available In Four Places Around the State

LOCATION

MT FWP Region 2 Office
3201 Spurgin Rd
Missoula, MT 59804

Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes
Natural Resources Department
301 Main St
Polson, MT 59860

Rexford Ranger District
949 US Highway 93 North
Eureka, MT 59917

Tally Lake Ranger Station
650 Wolf Pack Way
Kalispell, MT 59901

CONTACT

Torrey.Ritter@mt.gov
(406)542-5551
Elaine@Blackfootchallenge.org
(406)529-7663

Germainew@ckst.org
(406) 883-2888

Lauren.Michelsen@usda.gov
(406)296-2536

Mark.D.Ruby@gmail.com
(406)758-3544



Check out a loon trunk
near you!

Great for classrooms
or homeschool!



Montana Common Loon Working Group Spring 2026 Update

By Jessica Swanson and Jami Belt CLWG co-chairs

The Montana Common Loon Working Group (CLWG) is a team of biologists and volunteers from both federal and state governments and non-government groups. These include Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks; Montana Department of Natural Resources; USDA Forest Service; Glacier National Park; Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes; the Montana Loon Society; US Fish and Wildlife Service; University of Montana; the Blackfoot Challenge; and lakeshore representatives. The group helps coordinate annual Common Loon monitoring and management activities, supports outreach and educational programs, secures funding for research and management programs, and compiles reports and summaries based on the review and analysis of annual surveys and productivity data.

2025 Population Data

243 territories were monitored and preliminary data shows there were 88 breeding pairs and 47 chicks. Between 1999-2024 there has been an average of 69.6 breeding pairs, 47 chicks and an average fledge rate of 0.66.

Banding Efforts

This year, banding efforts occurred during the week of July 21st with a focus on targeting chicks. On Ashley Lake the crew tried to band both territories but were unsuccessful. They did locate the 'dam' pair, but without capture success, and were unable to find the 'eagle bay' pair. Banding on Seeley Lake was also unsuccessful. The pair was spooky and never let banders get close enough to net. They used the new electric motor, funded by MLS, on Ashley and Seeley Lakes. "It was great; so much quieter than the gas motor, long-lasting and definitely helped us get closer to those spooky loons," said Jami Belt.

Banding was attempted twice on Skyles Lake. The first attempt was unsuccessful. In the second attempt the crew captured and banded the leucistic chick. The last lake attempted was Logging Lake. The crew successfully caught one adult, which is the first backcountry bird ever caught in Montana!

2025 Band Contest Winners

Lindsey Rayson, DNRC's technician, had the most band returns submitted with 15! Megan Pepe is the random drawing winner, submitting four returns between Glacier and Kalispell West. Congratulations to you both and thank you for your hard work and dedication to loons! ♦

2025 MLS Annual Board & Membership Meeting

To reduce redundancy and increase efficiency, the 2025 Montana Loon Society Board of Directors' meeting was combined with the annual membership meeting for the first time. Previously, they had been held on the same day, one after the other. The meeting was held September 28 at Lone Pine State Park in Kalispell. Eight of nine board members were present, along with 11 members.

With board members Mark Ruby, George Leighton and Donna Love (secretary) retired, new board members Randy Beacham, Elaine Caton, Roy Morris and Brittany Watling (secretary) were voted in, filling all previous vacancies. Welcome new members! Up for re-election, board member Tony Dawson was also voted in for another term.

After a review of the treasurer's report, Common Loon Working Group Co-Chair Jessica Swanson gave a review of the 2025 field season, giving rise to a discussion on whether early lake ice thaw affects the timing of breeding. She submitted 2026 funding requests.

The group discussed redistribution of duties in the wake of secretary Donna Love retiring. Committees were formed for technology, education, finance, membership, and a scholarship fund and the newsletter was reassigned to Rachel Manley.

A new volunteer reimbursement policy was adopted by unanimous vote.

If you are interested in attending the annual meeting contact the Montana Loon Society at montanaloonsociety@gmail.com for more details.

Additional Board Meetings -

With so many functions to reorganize and redistribute, the board decided to hold meetings via Zoom throughout the year when needed. Two have been held: November 8, 2025 and January 8, 2026. Each was about an hour long and detailed more involved discussions about the newly formed committees and what their roles/needs are. ♦



To help Montana's loons, please purchase the Montana Loon Society license plate for your Montana vehicles or trailers.

How to Read a Common Loon Band in Montana

To determine population characteristics of Common Loons and better understand their behavior, we need everyone to look for color band combinations beginning as soon as ice-out this year on both breeding and foraging lakes. During the early part of the season, many pairs will tolerate visits by offspring or other loons. This is one of our best chances of seeing and documenting the young birds we banded in previous years return to Montana.

If you spot Common Loons this spring, summer, or fall, and have a spotting scope handy, take a few minutes to check them for the presence of color leg band combinations. You can usually see a band, if one is present, within 10 minutes, but it could take up to an hour. If you see a band and your scope is not adequate or your time is limited, report this to the CLWG immediately. We can possibly provide a high-quality, high-power scope or send someone out to that lake to get the band combinations.

When you observe loons, you may catch them raising a leg out of the water to stretch or scratch. This is most common when a loon is loafing or preening.

If the loon is banded, each leg will have a band; sometimes two on each. Some bands have stripes or dots. For the right and left leg, record the color of the bands along with whether any stripe or dot is present on the band, and, if so, the color of the stripe or dot. Be sure to figure out correctly which color band is closest to the body and which is closest to the foot (not always intuitive when the bird is facing you and moving around).

Tidbits to help with accurate band recording:

- Band colors: blue, red, white, orange, yellow, green, silver. Blue, green and red colored bands may also have a white stripe or dot and orange, white, and yellow bands may have a black stripe or dot.
- Silver on right leg means banded as an adult.
- Silver on left leg means banded as juvenile.



Bands are always recorded in order as:

1. Left leg closest to body
2. Left leg closest to foot
3. Right leg closest to body
4. Right leg closest to foot.

Please include the following info for all observations of bands or loons that you could clearly see the legs and can confirm that they are, or are not, banded. Please send photos if possible:

Lake name: _____ Date(s) observed: _____

Location on lake (Ideally coordinates or map with a pin): _____

Your name and contact information: _____

Left Leg (closest to body) (closest to foot) Right Leg (closest to body) (closest to foot)
(LL) _____ / _____ (RL) _____ / _____

Contact the montanaloonworkinggroup@gmail.com or submit our Survey123 form (contact your Local Loon area coordinator for info on how to download the mobile app) ASAP with all new banded loon sightings, even if you couldn't read the bands.

For details about observing loons and their bands, see Appendix C of the Montana Loon Plan-

<https://fwp.mt.gov/conservation/wildlife-management/common-loon>

See Appendix D of the plan for background on banding loons in Montana.

(To learn more go to: <https://montanaloons.org> and click on Report a Loon Sighting)



IRIEWARID



FOR OBSERVATIONS OF MONTANA'S BANDED & UNBANDED LOONS!

The Montana Loon Society is offering cash prizes for 2026 observations of unique banded loons or confirmed unbanded breeding loons!

Two \$100 awards will be decided by a random drawing from all individuals who submitted at least one observation by July Loon Day. To qualify, submit a Montana Loon Survey 123 form, or send band observations to the Common Loon Working Group email: montanaloonworkinggroup@gmail.com

To learn more, go to: <https://montanaloons.org> and click on Report a Loon Sighting

The most useful band reports are the ones that come in as soon as possible, so send them as you see them, even if you are not 100% sure of your observation. Qualified observations will be determined and counted solely by the CLWG. See the reverse side for information about how to observe and report loon bands. Winners will be announced at the Montana Common Loon Working Group Summer meeting in July.

(Federal and State government employees are not eligible for the cash reward if they observe loons as part of their job.)

Loons are very sensitive. Please enjoy them at a distance.

This contest is generously funded by the Montana Loon Society.

Kid's Corner

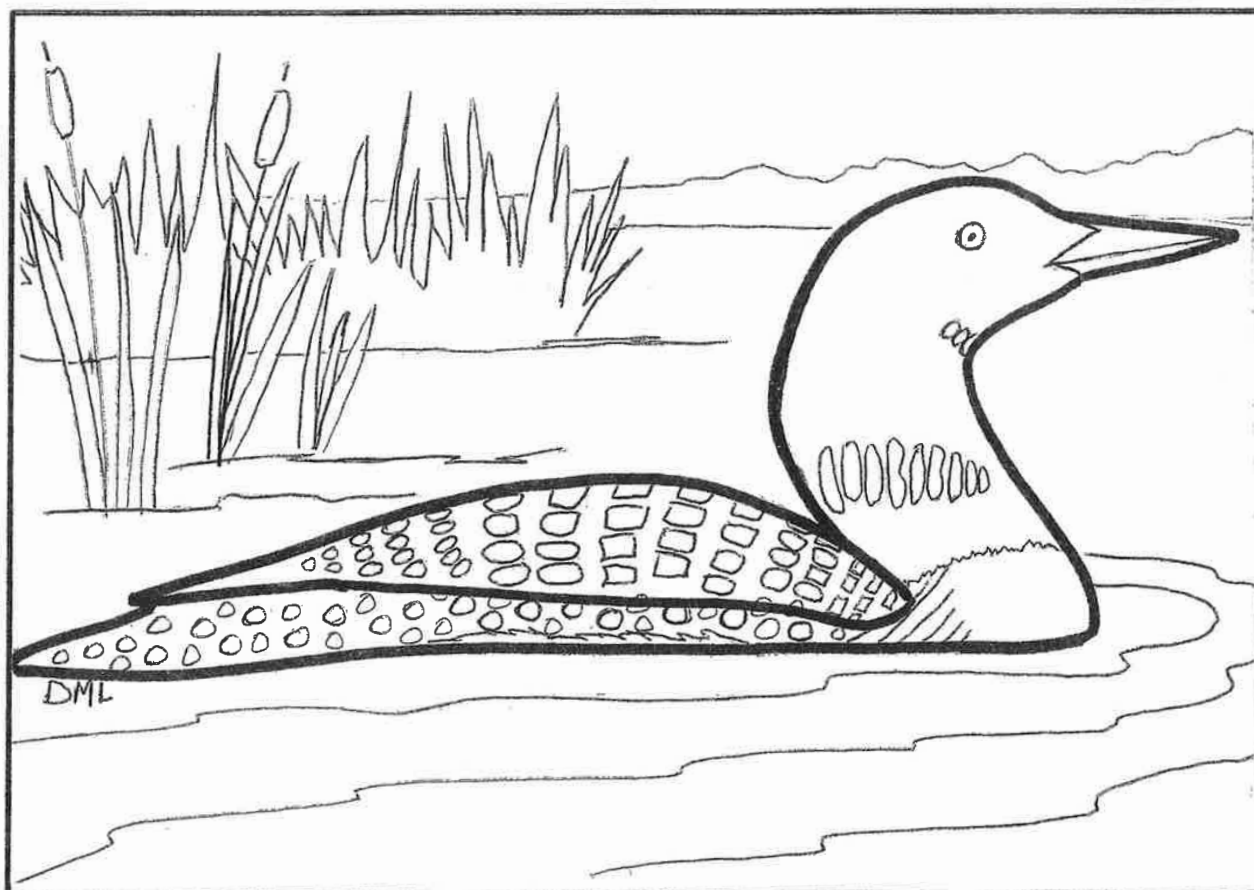
Name _____ Date _____

COMMON LOON

A common loon is the loon that people see most often. It is about three feet long and weighs up to 12 pounds. Its wingspan is about four feet wide. To see what color a common loon is, follow the directions below.



- _____ 1. Color the loon's bill black.
- _____ 2. Color the loon's eye red.
- _____ 3. Color the stripes on the loon's neck white.
- _____ 4. Color the rest of the loon's head and neck black.
- _____ 5. Color the loon's chest white.
- _____ 6. Color the spots on the loon's back and side white.
- _____ 7. Color the rest of the loon's back black.



Web Sites of Interest

- Montana Loon Society:
<https://montanaloons.org>
- Montana Loon Society on Facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/montanaloonsociety>
- ABC Species Profile by Lynn Kelly:
<https://montanaloons.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/151-AmericanBirdConservancy-Loons-by-Lynn-Kelly.pdf>
- MT FWP Common Loon Conservation Plan:
<https://fwp.mt.gov/binaries/content/assets/fwp/conservation/wildlife-reports/common-loon/loonreportwithoutappendices.pdf>
- MT FWP Common Loon Field Guide:
<https://fieldguide.mt.gov/speciesDetail.aspx?elcode=ABNBA01030>
- Glacier National Park Common Loon Citizens Science Project:
<https://www.nps.gov/rlc/crown/common-loon-citizen-science-project.htm>
- BRI (Biodiversity Research Institute):
<https://briwildlife.org/loon-program/>

Officers

President	Lynn Kelly	MontanaLoon Society@gmail.com
Vice President	Christie Ferruzzi	406.822-4856
Secretary	Brittany Watling	BWatling.mls@gmail.com
Treasurer	Don Skaar	406.442.3254

Board of Directors

Blackfoot/ Clearwater	Elaine Caton	Elaine@Blackfoot Challenge.org
Swan River Valley	Roy Morris	406.833.0825
Kootenai/ Tobacco/ Stillwater	Kristina Kindberg	406.889.5077
Thompson/ West Kalispell	Tony Dawson	406.253.6111
Glacier Park/ Flathead River Forks	Rachel Manley	RManley304@gmail.com
Libby/Troy	Randy Beacham	Beachamphoto@gmail.com

Mark Your 2026 Calendar!

- May 4-9 - Family Forestry Expo
- May 16 - Spring Loon Day count/survey
- July 18 - Summer Loon Day count/survey
- Loon Banding - week of July 20
- August 4 - CLWG summer meeting at Flathead National Forest Supervisor's Office, Kalispell
- Sept 27 - MLS annual board & membership meeting, location and time TBD

Want to go paperless?

*Email our membership team at
Bwatling.mls@gmail.com*

Help Montana's Loons

Sign up for a membership today.

Single Loon (Individual)	\$15.00
Breeding Pair (Family)	\$25.00
Loon Chick (Student)	\$10.00
Territorial Pair (Sustaining)	\$150.00
Raft of Loons (Organization)	\$300.00
Loon Lake (Life Member)	\$800.00

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____

State: _____ Zip: _____

Email (optional, but nice to have): _____

(Membership is Tax-Deductible)

Now you can

DONATE ONLINE using PayPal

From our website

<https://montanaloons.org/>

or

clip and mail this form and membership or
donation to

**Montana Loon Society
P.O. Box 1051
Polson, MT 59860**



Montana Loon Society
P.O. Box 1051
Polson, MT 59860

406.883.5797
montanaloonsociety@gmail.com
<https://montanaloons.org/>

To:

Inside This 2026 Newsletter

Loon Banding - Why and How.....1 & 9
 Leucistic Loon Chick.....2 & 9
 President's Corner.....3 & 9
 Winter Loon Identification.....4-5
 Area Loon Reports.....6-8
 Invasive Water Lilies.....9
 Awards and Recognition.....10
 Educational Loon Trunks.....10
 CLWG 2025 Spring Update.....11
 Board and Membership Meeting Reports.....11
 Leg Band Sighting Contest/Rules/Info....12-13
 Kid's Corner.....14
 Web Sites of Interest.....15
 MLS Board of Directors Information.....15
 Mark Your Calendar.....15
 Become a Member.....15

TO READ THIS NEWSLETTER ONLINE
go to:
<https://montanaloons.org/>
and click on "Our Team."

The Montana Loon Society's
Purpose is to:

- Monitor Common Loons in Montana,
- Increase public knowledge about Montana's loons,
- Protect and enhance critical loon habitat,
- Identify management or research needs and obtain funds for same,
- Facilitate cooperation between agencies, lakeshore owners and the general public to accomplish these goals.

