

Loon Rangers

New conservation program helps push northwest Montana loons to record numbers

By DAVE REESE
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Loon Rangers to the rescue! Under a Montana Loon Society program, two men this year have helped northwest Montana reach its highest-ever count on baby loons.

Gael Bissell, a wildlife biologist for Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks in Kalispell, said her department counted 51 common loon chicks this year, a record.

That mark can be attributed to the work of Justin Paugh and Tim Dykstra, northwest Montana's Loon Rangers.

Paugh and Dykstra spent the summer patrolling lakes and educating boaters and campers about how to operate their boats around loons and loon nesting sites.

Under the auspices of the Montana Loon Society, the Loon Rangers put up signs, talked to hundreds of people and monitored loons during their nesting season in early summer.

"Their work helped a great deal," Bissell said. "I can attribute the success in those heavily used lakes to education."

Heavy boat traffic near nesting sites can displace baby loons or cause their parents to abandon their nests.

Dykstra, a University of Montana graduate student, was based in the Seeley Lake area, while Paugh worked the Thompson chain of lakes, Upper Whitefish Lake, Beaver Lake, Ashley Lake and Tally Lake.

After nesting throughout the summer, loons congregate on Flathead Lake and Pablo Reservoir before migrating to the Pacific Ocean, Bissell said. Many of this year's chicks hatched late. "Hopefully they'll make it to the coast," she said. The loons spend three years in the ocean until they get their adult plumage, then return to where they were born. When they reach about 7 years old, they begin to reproduce.



Photo courtesy Donna Love

LOON RANGER Tim Dykstra puts up signs at Seeley Lake that help protect nesting loons.

This was the second straight year that two full-time Loon Rangers have patrolled the lakes of western Montana.

Financing for the two positions came from the Montana chapter of the Wildlife Society, Avista Corp. and Living with Wildlife. The Ashley Lake Homeowners Association and the Montana Department of Natural Resources and Conservation have pledged to help pay for the two positions next year, Bissell said. Because of

mortality migrating to and from the ocean, only about 30 percent of loon chicks that migrate to the ocean make it back to Montana to breed, Bissell said, so it's important to protect nesting loons. "Loons are not really replacing themselves until they're about 10 years old," Bissell said. "That's one of the reasons why we emphasize nesting success."

Reporter Dave Reese may be reached via e-mail at dreese@dailyinterlake.com