

## Foreword

When I first began working with loons as a young wildlife biologist in the summer of 1978, my research vessel was a seventeen-foot canoe. For the larger lakes I would borrow whatever motor craft was available, usually a crooked aluminum derelict of one brand or another with a retired and ill-tempered two-cycle kicker bolted to its transom, a rusted tool box in the bilge containing no wrench and the wrong-sized spark plugs, and a cement-filled coffee can with no anchor line. Those were the days. My primary tools aside from the vessel and a sodden 20-pound kapok life vest, which I used for a seat cushion, were my Sears 7x35 extra wide angle binoculars, a pocket-sized notebook, and three knife-sharpened No. 2 pencil stubs. I spent a lot of time alone on the water, watching the loons. It was a good job. Didn't pay much, but I enjoyed the open sky and learned a lot.

Looking back, those really do seem like the good old days. They might also

be called the Dark Ages. The body of scientific loon literature was pretty small back then. Our basic field library could be carried in a single pocket and consisted of a copy of Dr. Judith McIntyre's Ph.D. dissertation, *Biology and Behavior of the Common Loon* (printed from microfilm in small format and bound with a black cover, giving the loon biologist the look, at times, of a waterborne evangelist consulting the scriptures), and a tertiary, water-blurred photocopy of "The Common Loon in Minnesota" (Olson and Marshall, 1952—the year I was born). No one knew much about loons back then, but as I say, we were learning.

Much as I appreciate all that we learn about loons from our more complex scientific approaches these days, I'm glad that I was able to begin my work in the old-fashioned realm of naturalistic observation, simply watching objectively and getting to know the birds and their behaviors a little

better, much as a good hunter knows his deer and the fisherwoman her trout. Of course, as loon science matured, the research grew more sophisticated, more complex and expensive, employing higher technologies than I cared to mess with. It was David Evers, one of the authors of this book, who discovered the technique for the regular capture of loons in order to affix different colored bracelets to their feet so that we might monitor individuals for the first time. I recognized this as a major breakthrough in our study of loon demography, toxin loading, and more—but I retained a disinclination toward handling these mysterious creatures. Plucking them out of their innocent careers, likely scaring hell out of them, and then releasing them to be forever outed seemed disrespectful, I thought.

That was 17 years ago, but even back then I realized that we had to know more—have more facts—about the loons' plight in order to fight against their disappearance, in order to conserve the species.

This was not a moral need, but rather a political one. It seemed to me then and still does today that if we know we're poisoning a system it is only sensible, logical, ethical to stop polluting it. But the world in its modern, advanced state didn't work that way. We needed scientific proof; Evers among others (including New Hampshire's Loon Preservation Committee and Kate Taylor) recognized this. And I tagged along to help, at first to judge for myself whether the capture of loons would appear abusive, but I soon observed the care with which Evers' biologists handled the birds and witnessed the immediate reuniting of pairs or families after banding. I even netted a few birds myself, and held them in my hands. But the application of higher technologies (blood and feather sampling and analysis, statistical machinations, even the small encumbrance of tarsal bands) also seemed antithetical to the loons' wild mystique. I remained skeptical.

One July night a few years ago, I



learned another lesson. I was riding back from a good, long day of surveys on Chesuncook Lake in Maine in biologist Bill Hanson's truck with a tight, seaworthy boat in tow, when his cell phone rang. Evers' crew had observed a common loon with a fishing lure in its bill over on Wyman Lake. It was a pathetic sight, the loon appeared to be weakened and staying in one area, and they believed they might be able to capture it and remove

the hardware so that it could eat again. But they could use a second boat, a few more hands. The plan was to rendezvous at a remote boat landing just after dark.

Later, as our rescue flotilla motored out onto the dark lake, I thought of how many situations like this I'd seen in the early years in New Hampshire and Maine, before we had a technique to capture a loon so afflicted. How we could only watch them struggle—and how every one of them must have died an agonizing death of starvation and drowning. Now, Evers' research technique might effect a rescue, a humane and altruistic act unrelated to his scientific endeavor (or so it seemed).

Three powerful spotlight beams clicked on and we searched. Someone called out, our boat approached the victim, a loon's call played electronically now and then to attract our quarry. Closer... a net flourished, and the loon was in our custody. Under the lights of headlamps and with hemostats and wire cutters we carefully clipped off the trebles

embedded in the tongue, freed that spirit of its hideous impediment, and released it onto the black water. We sat quietly for a while out there, allowing peace to descend, and then motored back to reassemble on shore and celebrate our success in the ambient starlight.

Why do we study loons? And why another volume of answers to questions about them? I believe there is more to it than scientific or political needs for data and answers. We learn about loons because we are curious about the things we love, because knowledge leads to a deeper intimacy, a stronger connection to the object of our affection. For me, the first and primary question to any gatherer of truths is not *What have you found*, but rather, *Why have you come here?* Few wildlife biologists that I know entered their field of study in order to answer a particular scientific quandary. They come to fulfill a desire to be closer to the wilder spirits—of the wild creatures themselves, or of a chosen landscape.

And this is what brings us all together—field biologist, scientific research technician, curious reader, and interested observer—this desire for intimacy with the magic of the real world. And what the resultant inspired knowledge leads to, when shared (as in the following pages), is the opportunity for all of us together to help free the loons from entanglement in our modern web of hardware and technologies, from poisons, fishing tackle, and in the end—best of all—from the pall of misunderstanding and ignorance. And if we can do that for the loons, my God—think what we could do for ourselves.

That's what we drank to on Caratunk Landing that night as we listened to the wails of a newly unencumbered spirit out there in the starlit darkness. We weren't just celebrating the loon's revival.

We were celebrating our own.

Jeff Fair  
Lazy Mountain, Alaska  
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