

Romancing the Loons; A Certain Red-Eyed Charisma Brings Chivalry to the Wild

By WINNIE HU, The New York Times
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Robert E. James straps a Kevlar canoe to his back and sets out for the most remote places under the most trying conditions: glaring heat, blood-sucking flies, even a cracked rib or two.

Mr. James, a retired high school science teacher, is one of a growing army of bird-watchers, known as the Loon Rangers, who are issued gold plastic badges and sworn to protect the wild loons of the Adirondacks for the Audubon Society of New York State.

They have plenty of company. The bird's striking good looks -- velvety black head and ruby eyes -- and its haunting, ethereal cries have endeared it to vacationers and scientists alike, and have fueled a spreading conservation movement.

These days, the birds may not need all the help. In the Northeast, where loon protection dates to the 1970's, the population seems to be stable or even increasing in places like the Adirondacks, despite threats from acid rain, mercury, lead fishing sinkers and shoreline development.

But you would hardly know it from the flurry of efforts to save the loons, and the way the birds have flocked into the affections of Americans.

"I look forward to being out on the ponds with the loons more than anything else," said Mr. James, 75.

Long a symbol of the wilderness, the common loon is attracting the kind of public following and scientific attention once reserved for more exotic species like bald eagles, gray wolves and whales.

Loons are popping up on coffee mugs and license plates, starring in books and videos, and helping to sell everything from environmental causes to alternative rock music from a Seattle band.

"I have nothing against the elk or the moose, but if you're painting a picture of the wilderness, the loon is sexier," said Neil F. Woodworth, deputy executive director of the Adirondack Mountain Club, which has asked its 40,000 members to keep track of the loons that they see during their outings.

In the Adirondacks, nearly 10,000 anglers have traded in their lead sinkers for steel ones since Memorial Day as part of a campaign to protect loons from lead poisoning. Wildlife and environmental groups led efforts to pass a state law this spring that will ban the sale of small lead sinkers as of 2004.

More than 300 volunteers, including the Loon Rangers, traveled to lakes and ponds in July to count the birds for the second annual loon census; by some estimates, there are more than 1,000 loons in the state. Protect-the-loon signs have been posted throughout the Adirondacks.

"People really like loons," said Dr. Nina Schoch, coordinator of the Adirondack Cooperative Loon Program, which monitors the birds. "So they want to help them any way they can -- even if the population doesn't need help."

In truth, the loons may be helping people more than vice versa. Since the birds feed primarily on fish, pollutants like mercury are likely to accumulate in their tissues. And because loons return to the same territory year after year, they can serve as barometers of pollution, like canaries in a coal mine.

"People are realizing more than ever that loons are a good indicator of the environment," said David Evers, executive director of the BioDiversity Research Institute, a group in Maine that studies loons.

As a graduate student in 1989, Dr. Evers pioneered a way to capture the skittish birds by mesmerizing them with a bright spotlight at night so they could be scooped up with a net. Since then, he has tested loons for mercury exposure in 11 states, including New York. The highest levels of mercury have been found in the Northeast.

These findings prompted Dr. Schoch, a veterinarian, to start the Adirondack Cooperative Loon Program in 2001, with donations from the Wildlife Conservation Society, which runs the Bronx Zoo, and other groups. Her program has tested dozens of birds for a long-term mercury study.

In New York, loons are labeled a species of "special concern," a category below endangered or threatened, because they once seemed to be disappearing from parts of the Northeast. Field surveys and anecdotal evidence suggest that is no longer the case, though experts say it is impossible to be sure. "It may appear that they're stable now," said John Ozard, a state wildlife biologist. "But we may have an increasing problem with mercury that will impact the population in 10 years."

In any event, the save-the-loon movement cannot be explained by science alone. Loons stand out in a crowded animal kingdom because, quite simply, they have charisma. Built for water, the birds dive and swim like fish but can barely stand on land. They woo their mates in the open, not unlike characters in a soap opera, and often carry their young on their backs.

Those idiosyncrasies have won over researchers and environmentalists. "The fish got the attention of people like Trout Unlimited," said John F. Sheehan, a spokesman for the Adirondack Council, an advocacy group for the park. "But there is a much bigger affinity for loons, mainly because they're perceived as being more cuddly."

His group adopted the bird as its logo years ago and added a recording of loon calls to its Web site's home page

(www.adirondackcouncil.org). It has also bestowed hand-carved wooden loons on those it honors as conservationists of the year; one recipient, Gov. George E. Pataki, keeps his on a coffee table in his office.

The loons have long brought out the romance and passion in people. The Canadian government sent a specially commissioned watercolor of loons to Prince Charles and Diana Spencer as a wedding present. The novelist E. L. Doctorow was so inspired by a sign for Loon Lake, in the Adirondacks, that he used the name as a book title.

In possibly the most famous loon moment of all, Katharine Hepburn's character in the 1981 movie "On Golden Pond" fancied that the loons were actually talking to her. "The loons, the loons, they're welcoming us back," she exclaimed with delight. Her cantankerous husband, played by Henry Fonda, had none of that romance left in him. "I don't hear a thing," he grumbled.

And how many other animals receive top billing in a band?

Jonathan Kochmer, a Yale-trained biologist turned musician, and his longtime partner, Sarah Scott, named their alternative rock band Two Loons for Tea. "They're fiercely loyal to each other, and we've been through a lot together," he said. "But it's not just personally that we identify with the loons; our music does as well. It has that shimmering, ethereal, sensual, nocturnal quality."

The delicate-looking loons even have their very own protectors. The ranks of the Loon Rangers in the Adirondacks have swelled to 165, with nearly one-third joining in the last three years, said Fred Realbuto, director of the Audubon Society of New York State. The Loon Rangers program dispatches the volunteers every summer to watch over loons and compile field reports.

"For whatever reason, the interest in loons is escalating," he said. "Maybe we're just working our way down the chain. We started with the big stuff, and pretty soon we'll be working on the spotted lizard."

