

SMITHFIELD: Night mission rescues loon

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SMITHFIELD -- Watching a female loon struggle to barely move out of the way of an oncoming personal watercraft, Linda Rice knew something was wrong.

A few hours later, Rice was part of a five-person rescue team out on North Pond, searching for a slowly dying loon who was entangled in fishing wire. The rescue mission lasted until the early hours of the morning, but ultimately saved the bird's life.

Rice, who lives on North Pond during the summer and in Manhattan the rest of the year (she said her job is wig supervisor for "Saturday Night Live"), had noticed the loon in the shallow shore water outside her home for several days. On Aug. 8, the loon was at most five feet from shore, unusual for a bird with a reputation as a deep diver and great swimmer.

Rice made some calls and was put in touch with Chris DeSorbo, a research biologist with the Biodiversity Research Institute of Gorham. By about 7:30 that evening, DeSorbo, Rice and three others were out on North Pond searching for the loon.

The group went out on a boat, barely moving above idle speed so as not to scare off the birds. One volunteer held a large spotlight, but that was the only light or noise coming from the boat.

"The scary thing was, we had to travel completely dark, so that the boat would not give us away," Rice said. "We had to be absolutely quiet."

Within an hour, DeSorbo netted a bird, but it was a healthy male loon, not the injured female. Rice suggested they look near the shore of the island at North Pond, and a little after 2 a.m., they spotted and netted the loon, which was unable to fly and in the water behind a large rock.

"I could barely believe what we saw when that bird came into the boat," Rice said. "There was fishing line wrapped underneath her arm and around her elbow, and had been cutting into her elbow. Part of it was healed and there were new cuts."

The fishing line had also wrapped tightly around one of the loon's wings. The loon had swallowed the hook, and was inches away from swallowing the lead sinker, which would have been fatal.

"A few of the feathers were actually standing upright because she was wrapped so tightly in the string," said Skip Harrop, one of the volunteers on the boat. "It was awful. You could see that it was a long time because there were open wounds that had healed over and actually calloused around them."

While DeSorbo held the bird, Rice snipped off the wire. The hook was irretrievable, but DeSorbo informed Rice that because the loon was feeding, the hook would rust out over time and allow the loon to survive.

After marking the loon, taking blood tests and releasing the bird, the group returned to the boat launch around 3:30 a.m., and Rice reports the loon is on its way back to good health.

"She seems to be doing really well," Rice said. "She's acting like a loon. She's diving deep. She's swimming a lot faster than she was, and she's not right up against the shore anymore."

Unfortunately, fishing line is a common hazard to birds, according to Keel Kemper, a wildlife biologist with the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

"Discarded fishing line, it's pretty tenacious," Kemper said. "It lasts a long time in the environment. I get calls about it all the time."

Kemper added that lead sinkers are the top cause of loon mortality in New England. DeSorbo said the sinkers are similar in size to the stones loons eat to help them digest food. Sinkers that size are no longer sold in Maine, but previously sold ones are still in use.

Most distressing, Rice recently saw another loon in North Pond with fishing line under its wing. Attempts to find that loon have been unsuccessful.

"I'm a sportsman, but I think fishermen ought to take into account what happens when they're not so careful with their line and hooks and whatnot," Harrop said. "The sportsmen who use the pond should have a little more respect for what they're using."

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