

Common Loon

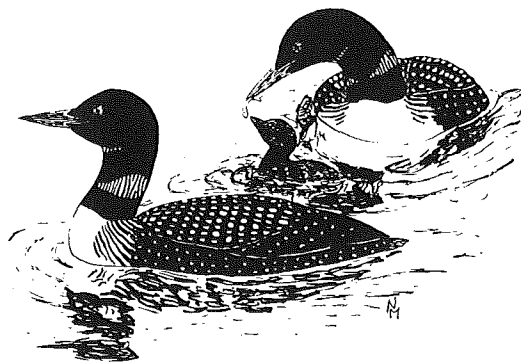
Gavia immer

Vermont is along the southern fringe of the Common Loon's breeding range, which formerly extended south to Connecticut and northeastern Pennsylvania (Palmer 1962). For the past several years concern over the loon's status across the northern tier of states has been growing. Common Loons are listed as Threatened in New Hampshire and of Special Concern in New York, and proposed for Endangered Species status in Vermont.

The Common Loon's breeding habitat is freshwater lakes, particularly those containing small islands or coves (Palmer 1962). McIntyre (1983) concluded that the habitat should have adequate food and clear water for finding prey, suitable nest sites, and a nursery area for rearing the young. In Vermont the loon's range is closely linked with zones of boreal forest. During the Atlas Project, lakes used for nesting were in spruce-fir or in spruce-fir-northern hardwood transition zones.

Undisturbed islands or marshy shoreline, adequate fish and crayfish, and clear water to a depth of at least 3 m (10 ft) appear to delimit breeding distribution for Common Loons in Vermont, according to data collected by the Vermont Institute of Natural Science's Loon Project Surveys, 1977-84. Of 24 lakes used for nesting in Vermont, 11 had islands and loon pairs nesting on islands. Of these 11 lakes, 10 had successful nestings while only 3 of the 13 lakes without islands had successful nestings.

From 1977 through 1983 the number of Common Loon pairs attempting to nest each year varied from 7 to 19. Only 50% to 71% of attempted nestings were successful; the number of chicks hatched ranged from 11 to 15. Those lakes where the most consistent nesting success was found were East Long Pond (Woodbury), Green River Reservoir (Hyde Park), Long Pond (Westmore), Maidstone Lake (Maidstone), Norton Pond (Norton and Warren Gore), Peacham Pond (Peacham), Somerset Reservoir (Somerset

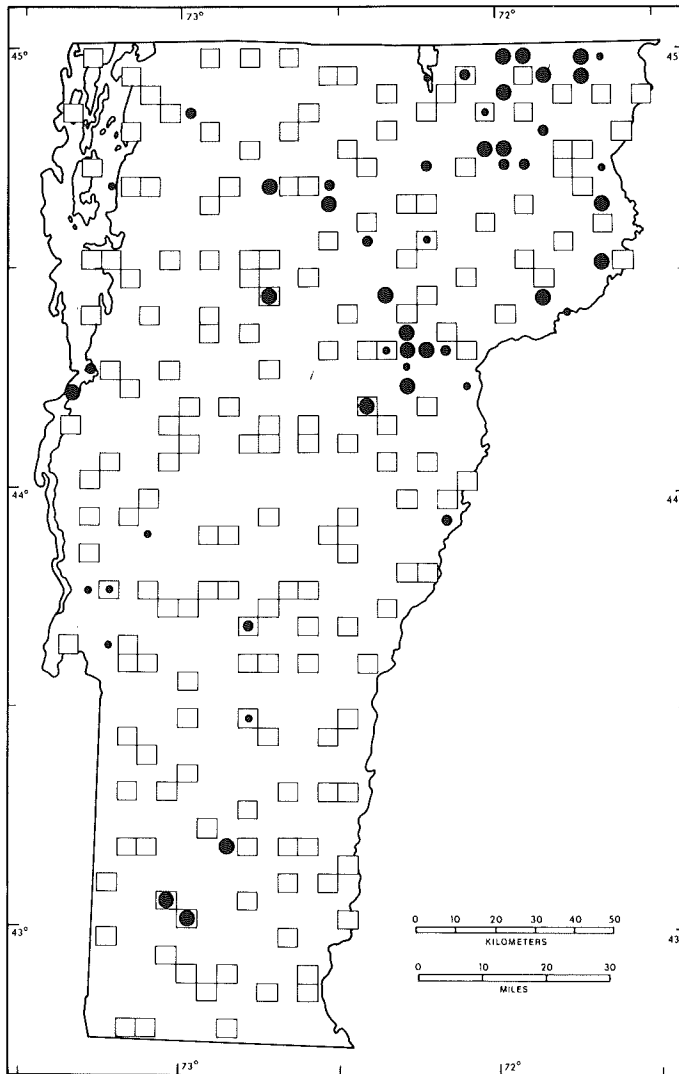


and Stratton), and Thurman Dix Reservoir (Orange).

Scanty historical information makes charting any long-term trends in the Common Loon's population difficult. Five nesting sites that are no longer used were documented (Metcalf 1978), but nesting on Somerset, Green River, and Waterbury reservoirs has only recently been documented. Other studies indicate declines in populations ranging from 35% to 75% in the Northeast (Sutcliffe 1979).

Common Loons generally return to Vermont lakes from coastal wintering waters after ice-out in mid April or early May. Courtship rituals are comparatively simple (McIntyre 1975). The vocal repertoire of the Common Loon, perhaps its most well-known behavioral trait, consists of three highly audible calls given among family or flock members.

Nest sites are often near the previous year's nest site and territorial boundaries are often similar (S. Sutcliffe, pers. comm.), suggesting that the same loon pair occupies a particular lake each year. McIntyre (1975) stated, "The ultimate factor in selecting a nest site is its suitability as a location protected from wind and waves and its safety from predators." Nests are of three types—a hummock on an old stump or grass mound; a scrape in the sand; or a mound constructed of mud, weeds, and dead vegetation—and are placed close to the water's edge. Generally 2 eggs are laid between mid May and early June. Both parents share the incubation duties; incubation lasts from 25 to 33 days (with 28 days the



No. of priority blocks in which recorded

TOTAL II (6%)

Possible breeding: 5 (46% of total)
 Probable breeding: 2 (18% of total)
 Confirmed breeding: 4 (36% of total)

Physiographic regions in which recorded

	no. of priority blocks	% of region's priority blocks	% of species' total priority blocks
Champlain Lowlands	0	0	0
Green Mountains	5	9	46
North Central	4	21	36
Northeast Highlands	0	0	0
East Central	1	5	9
Taconic Mountains	1	6	9
Eastern Foothills	0	0	0

average). In Vermont, 14 dates for nests with eggs ranged from May 21 to June 29.

Adults may renest if the first nest is destroyed. Almost immediately after hatching chicks take to the water. At 2 to 3 weeks the young begin catching their own food; by 8 weeks they are independent; and by the 11th week they are flying. Immatures may spend several years on the ocean before returning inland to breed.

The loon's diet consists of fish, crustaceans, mollusks, and aquatic insects. In Vermont, adult loons were observed feeding fingerling-sized fish and crayfish to juveniles. After locating their prey in the water, loons secure it by diving.

Among the northeastern states currently within the Common Loon's breeding range, Vermont has one of the lowest populations of nesting loons. Shoreline development, recreational use of lakes, water-level fluctuation, and water quality can limit the loon's nesting success.

CHRISTOPHER FICHEL