

BEST PRACTICES



Winter's Haunting Cry, the Common Loon

Common loons are found in the freshwater habitats of northern North America including much of Canada and Alaska. Until the 1890's, common loons were a typical breeding species both east and west of the Cascade crest in Washington State. Population decline across the United States is thought to be the result of over hunting, shoreline development and habitat loss in northern lakes which are used for nesting.

In winter, common loons can be found in the waters of Puget Sound and other coastal estuaries as well as large lakes, reservoirs and rivers. They breed in freshwater lakes and reservoirs in more remote areas of Washington State and all throughout Canada and Alaska. As they require crystal-clear lakes with abundant populations of small fish, they make an excellent indicator species for water quality. Where you find loons, you usually find clean water.



Common loons are long bodied water birds that sit low in the water. They measure 26–36 inches, with a 50–55 inch wingspan and weigh 8–19 pounds. They have powerful legs set far back on their body, making them highly adapted for swimming and diving. However, they are less capable walking on land. Males are larger than females, and individuals can be territorial. It has been discovered that individuals defending territories are larger than those without.

Common loons have a thick pointed bill used primarily to eat small fish, in both fresh and saltwater. Their powerful legs make them adept swimmers, shooting through the water and allowing them to make sharp turns when their prey changes direction.

Both male and female common loons have black and white plumage during the breeding season. Breeding birds have a black and white vertical striped collar and checkerboard back. Males select the nest site on a quiet hidden lakeshore, close to a bank, often with a steep drop-off that allows the bird to approach the nest from underwater.

This species is identified as a Priority Species under Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's Priority Habitat and Species Program. In the state of Washington, priority species require protective measures for their survival based on their population status, sensitivity to loss of habitat and recreational, commercial, or tribal importance. Climate change will also likely affect this species as their food sources decline due to increased water temperature.

This winter, you can see common loons feeding in the waters near Woodard Bay, Priest Point Park, Burfoot Park, Eld Inlet and Billy Frank Jr. Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge. Sitting low in the water they are easily identified by their unmistakable haunting call!

Source: Stream Team News, Winter 2021