

## LOONS IN LOVE

Joan Gorga

Shortly after ice-out on Gregg Lake this spring, I was out paddling in my kayak and noticed a pair of loons swimming around together making low murmurs and coos. A little while later, one of them climbed out onto a low rock and called softly to the other, who responded by joining the first on the rock. It didn't take me long to figure out what they were doing.

Did this mean we might have loons nesting on Gregg Lake this year? To my knowledge, loons nesting on other lakes, especially Willard Pond, have used Gregg Lake for feeding, but they have never been reported to nest on Gregg Lake. I searched online and asked a few people some pertinent questions about loon behavior, but the real bonanza came when I pulled into a parking lot to go for a wildflower walk with some fellow students from a class I was taking. One of the license plates read "NHLOONS." This was meant to be!

The driver of that car turned out to be a trustee of the Loon Preservation Committee. He assured me that loons usually nest not far from their mating site, and the other Antrim resident in the wildflower class, Lucille Lacombe, and I got our first assignment – "Find that nest!" He also guided us to intern Emlyn Crocker, whose job it was to monitor the loons of the Monadnock Region this summer.

A week or so after the loons mated, I spotted a single loon on the water not far from the mating site. I paddled slowly by the area, and there it was, a surprisingly well-camouflaged loon sitting on a nest low on the lake shore. My husband, Frank, and I watched the loons from a distance for several days, even witnessing a changing-of-the-guard as one relieved the other on the nest. However, a few days later, they abandoned the nest. There was no sign of eggs. I had seen a weasel only twenty feet from the nest site, but it was hard to tell whether eggs had even been laid, and Emlyn suggested that we still keep an eye out. "Maybe they were just practicing." She also explained that this wasn't quite a typical loon nesting spot. Usually they would choose a spot on a small island where they have the relative safety of being surrounded by water.

A few days after that, we got some long-awaited heavy rain and the nest was completely flooded by the rising lake water. But the loons were still hanging around together, swimming and diving and looking like loons in love.

While driving by the end of the lake a couple of days in a row in early June, I again spotted a single loon hanging around in the shallow area of the lake called the meadows,

near the boat launch. This called for another investigation by kayak. I moved slowly along the shore, rounded a small island, and voilà, I was face-to-face with a loon sitting on a nest on an even smaller island. This was the ideal nesting site Emlyn had described. We debated whether to rope off the nest to protect it, since it was located near the busiest part of the lake, and ropes and signs have a way of attracting people who otherwise might never go near the nest. In the end, after a photo was posted on Facebook, we broke down and helped Emlyn string a rope across the lake corner.

Loons generally incubate their eggs for 26–28 days. On the 26<sup>th</sup> day after I found the second nest, I paddled over towards the rope, caught a glimpse of a loon low on the nest, and was noisily greeted by the mate in the water, who put on a dramatic show to lead me away. We had heavy rain the next day, and the lake again rose several inches. By the following day, the loons had left the nest, but I couldn't see any sign of a chick. I paddled over to the abandoned nest with Emlyn. She collected shell fragments from the nest for analysis by the Loon Preservation Committee. We searched, but couldn't find signs of another egg carried off by a predator or floated off the nest by the rising water. If the shell wasn't broken, the mottled brown egg would be hard to see on the lake bottom. Apparently, if eggs are lost to predation, the loons will often re-nest, but not if a chick actually hatches. The fragments in the nest suggested that at least one chick had hatched. Some men who had been fishing from the bridge reported seeing a massive battle with a third loon, who may have killed a newly-hatched chick in a territorial battle. We don't really know what became of the loon eggs on Gregg Lake this year, but it was still a noteworthy event for the lake, and we hope they'll try again next year. □

