How it All Started
A History of Our Loon Nesting Program at Halfmoon Lake
by
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I grew-up on a farm in Alton, just 2 miles from Halfmoon Lake. I have been swimming, boating, fishing, and water skiing on this lake since 1945. During my high school and college years, I worked at Hollywood Beach. The Bennett's, the long-term owners of the beach at that time, became my second parents. I met my wife there in 1959, and our 5 kids grew-up spending their summer afternoons there, until they got jobs as teenagers. When I retired in 1998, it only seemed logical that we would buy a house on the lake, so our grandchildren could grow up summering here. We have been living on the lake since 2000.

After a couple of years back on the lake, I realized that over the years I had seen many loons on the lake, but could not remember ever seeing any baby loons. Talking with others on the lake, I learned that several people had seen Loons nesting, but sadly noted that most eggs would be destroyed before they hatched. Loons look to build their nests on land mostly surrounded by water for protection. The fact that we have no islands, our loons tended to build their nests on the water's edge, where the eggs were subjected to flood water, or became easy pickings for foxes and raccoons.

I contacted the Loon Preservation Committee in 2010 about placing a floating nest on our lake and was told that the lake may be too small. For optimal nest placement, we needed a cove or inlet that could be closed off from boat traffic. They questioned that we had a mating pair. After becoming Vice-President of our Lake Association in 2012, Bill Mannion, then President, and myself agreed that we, as representatives of Halfmoon Lake Association would approach the Loon Preservation Committee telling them about our yearly nesting pair and request their help in locating a floating nest on our lake. That following spring, Bill and I attended an all-day workshop to help build 12, new floating loon nests. Their compensation would be a nest, delivered to Bill's house, for use on our lake.

The placement that was suggested that first year, was behind the point at the boy's camp (Camp Mi-Te-Na), where power boats could stay clear. That placement proved unsuccessful. Bill's wife, Pat, who had been keeping track of the loons using a telescope from their deck, noticed that the loons spent much time in the spring around the rocks behind Fernhill Point, right in front of their house. The nest was moved to that location, and the Loons seemed interested. The loons however, were bothered by a pair of muskrats which had a house nearby and so the loons didn't nest that year.

The next year we moved the nest about 30 feet farther west of the first location and in deeper water, between some big rocks. The loons took to it within 3 days, mated, nested and we had our

first pair of eggs hatched on our floating nest. The nest has been placed in that same spot every year since. Once loons have accepted a nest location, it's recommended that you keep it in the same place each year. Our pair of loons have hatched two chicks every year to date, although we have lost one chick in two different years. In 2021 the Loon Preservation Committee was able to catch and band one of our baby loons for the first time.

Loons are an ocean bird, related to the albatross and penguin. Our baby loons will go to the ocean when they leave our lake and spend the next 5-6 years out at sea. When reaching breeding age, they will pair up, and return to the fresh water lakes to mate and raise their young. With their legs located far back on their bodies, they are very powerful swimmers, but cannot walk on land. To move on land or get up onto the nest, they drag themselves along using their wings like crutches. Because of their weight, up to 40-50 pounds, they need a long distance to take off on water. They can be seen flapping their wings and running with their feet on top of the water during take-off. In December of 2021, dozens of loons were iced in on NH lakes because of the late ice-in. The open water quickly became too small for take-off. Even then, rescuers had to wait until the ice closed in even more, in order to net them and transport them to the coast.

Loon families are very interesting to watch. Baby loons will not return to the nest once the second egg has hatched. They are able to swim and dive from birth. During the first two weeks, baby loons can be seen up on their mothers back. They weigh so little that the cold water can cause hypothermia in a short time. Sheltered under their mother's wing, they are kept warm and away from predators (snapping turtles, eagles, and other loons).

Some years the family will stay together as a foursome. One year the parents split up, each taking one baby to tender. They even left that fall in pairs, a week apart. Some years the parents will leave a week or two before their babies. In the years where one of the babies was lost, the remaining baby stayed with the mother. The father would help feed the baby when it was small, but go off on his own once the baby got bigger.

When viewing loons, you can tell the difference between when a loon is feeding and when it is just scouting around. If the loon is sitting low in the water, he is feeding. Loons will work the air out of their feathers with their beak to reduce their buoyancy when feeding. Then they will raise up out of the water flapping their wings to add air, increasing their buoyancy, then riding high in the water when just scouting.

I hope all our residents and boaters will enjoy and respect our loons as much as I have over the years. Your support and commitment to our nesting program here at the lake will help to ensure its continued success.