

The Loon Guardians of Ossipee Lake

You may have recently noticed the Loons on Ossipee Lake, gathering in large numbers. Given their territorial nature, this always seems unusual. It is as if they are gathering to discuss how successful their summer has been, an end of season celebration of sorts. These curious birds cast aside their need for personal space in the fall and meet in these large groups before they fly off to the ocean.

They'll spend October through March or April away from their inland breeding lakes. The adults will return in the spring and nesting pairs usually return to their nest sites from last summer. The juvenile Loons will stay on the ocean for 2 years or more.

When they have matured to adulthood, they will look for a new lake, a new territory and then find a suitable mate. They are usually six or seven years old when they first breed on their own territory. When they do breed, they will most often have 2 eggs and they will take turns sitting on this clutch until it hatches. It will take all summer for both parents to feed and teach and protect the new family member. But when the fall comes, the adults gather and prepare to fly to the ocean. They have taught their spawn everything they know and now it is time for their adolescent to figure it out.



(photo courtesy of Colleen Laurence)



(photo courtesy of Tracy Maidment)

It was perfectly logical that the Loon volunteers, affectionately referred to as the Loonies, would gather this fall. On Friday, August 28, 2026 a large group of Loon volunteers and supporters gathered together for the first time at Totem Pole Park, in their open air pavilion. Totem Pole graciously let The Loonies use this space, the weather was perfect, the company was thoughtful and pleasant.

These volunteers came from every corner of Ossipee Lake; from its bays and coves to its shoreline communities. Some live here year-round while others are here only on weekends. What they share is a deep commitment to protecting one of the lake's most treasured residents; the

Common Loon. Every day, this dedicated group of volunteers works to protect the loon population of Ossipee Lake.

At the heart of this effort is Dennis Gould, affectionately known as **“The Ossipee Lake Loon Guy”**. Dennis started volunteering on Ossipee Lake in 2000 by cleaning and taking care of Long Sands and Short Sands in addition to conducting water sampling. He was an original member of the Ossipee Lake Natural Area committee led by Dr Don Kent. Dennis states:

“I fell in love with the magnificent loons and started assisting with monitoring nesting, chicks and loons on Ossipee Lake. This has grown to assembling a Team to do the yearly census, putting out signs and ropes to protect nests, and bringing out the state biologist three or four times a year to survey all the loons, nest, chicks, and to collect hatched egg shells I became a person on Ossipee Lake for other residents and boaters to call for potential loons in distress and to be an interface between the Loon Preservation Committee and boaters/residents.”

Dennis is quick to deflect any praise to his conservation efforts and his extensive, well organized and educated Loonie Team. Dennis rarely uses the word “*I*” when talking about his accomplishments instead he talks about “*we*” and “*the team.*” This year, the Loonie Team included Charlene Becht, Megan Broderick, Kyle Copeland, John Cummings, Ben DeLorge, Kate DeLorge, Michael Downey, Seamus Downey, Susan Fine, Mary Jane Hilton, June Howlett, Colleen Masterson Laurence, Glen Lily, Bill Maidment, Tracy Maidment, Susan Marks, John MacDonald, Norma Pulzetti, Kalysha Rivera, Sue Shiels and Gloria Villari.

Tracy Maidment said that there were many reasons that she decided to become a member of the Loonie Team:

“As a lifelong Ossipee lake person, I have always been fascinated by loons. When I began to learn about their history and the unique qualities they possess, I realized how special they are, and how fortunate we are to share the lake with these beautiful birds.

When I was young, Ossipee Lake’s loon population was practically non-existent. Thanks to the efforts of the LPC, that has drastically changed. But it doesn’t come easy, and the loons need all the help they can get to thrive.

When Dennis Gould reached out looking for volunteers to join him in helping monitor, count, and protect our Ossipee Lake loons, I immediately knew I wanted to be involved in helping these majestic birds.”

Sue Shiels would probably tell you that a day in the life of a Loonie is priceless. She and her boyfriend John Cummings love to take their pontoon boat out on Ossipee Lake whenever possible. “A change in our schedules has allowed us to spend more time out on the lake during the week, when things are a little quieter and more peaceful.”

“We’re usually in the water by 11:00 a.m., and that’s when the search begins! There’s always a little game as we leave the dock: Who will be the first to spot a loon? Funny thing is, there’s never a prize. Just laying eyes on one of these beautiful birds is prize enough.

From there, we slowly cruise around the Main Lake, venturing into all the coves and keeping an eye out for nesting loons. As the summer progresses, our mission changes to finding the chicks swimming alongside their parents. Later in the season, we look for those same chicks to see how well they’ve learned to dive.

We continue through the channel and into the other bays, checking each familiar spot until we’ve accounted for as many loons and chicks as we can. It has become our favorite kind of treasure hunt.

Our nearly eight-year-old grandson, Justin, has been coming out on the boat with us for years, and he is a true Loonie too! He gets excited every time he spots a loon. And when we come across several together—or, even better, a chick—he’ll ask Papa to shut off the motor so we can drift quietly and simply watch them. One of our best Loon experiences was the day when the three of us took the Jet Ski to Danforth Bay. We had shut the motor off and were just floating when a Loon surfaced about 15 feet away from us. Wow! It was amazing to see one so close!

It doesn’t matter how many times we go out on the lake; this is what we do. We never get tired of searching, watching, and enjoying these incredible birds in their natural surroundings. For us, a perfect day on Ossipee Lake isn’t about how far we travel or how long we stay out. It’s about being together, enjoying the lake we love, and—hopefully—seeing lots and lots of loons along the way.

That’s what being a Loonie on the Lake is all about.”

In the mid 1970s, the Loon Preservation Committee was formed and volunteers and staff actually began monitoring activity. Occasional Loon activity on Ossipee Lake and its bays had been documented. Twenty years ago, a small handful of adult loons were present each year, but successful nesting was rare or absent.

John Cooley of the LPC states:

“In the past decade, the Loon population on Ossipee Lake has truly come into its own. Gradual but steady growth means that in 2026, there are seven established breeding territories on Ossipee Lake. In some recent years, we have hosted as many as six active nests, hatching as many as six

chicks, with a maximum of four chicks surviving to fledge in mid-August. In some recent good years, overall breeding success for this Ossipee subpopulation has been above the statewide average.

True to their names, Loon Island in Broad Bay and Loon Island in Leavitt Bay have both hosted active nesting loon pairs in the last decade, and Loon Island in Leavitt Bay has recently been conserved as a protected natural area so that Loon nesting can be encouraged and continued.

Lake use by humans has increased since these islands were originally named, and the historical habitat was last occupied by loons. Now, active nest site protection and outreach is needed to help loons and people share the lake. This involves floating nest rafts, placing warning signs near vulnerable nests, coordinating with the NH Dam Bureau to prevent nest flooding by keeping the water level stable, and spreading the word to boaters to give loons the space they need to forage, nest, and brood their young. “



*Dennis Gould, The Ossipee Lake Loon Guy and John Cooley, Sr. Biologist with the LPC
(Photo courtesy of Tracy Maidment)*

Dennis credits the success of the Ossipee Lake Loon population to the cooperation of various managers of lakeside camps.

Jackie Gerald, Assistant Resort Manager at Westward Shores states:

“Having spent the last 9 years living and working on Ossipee Lake, loons have become not only a part of my job but also a part of my home. Loons play such an important role in our lake’s ecosystem and survival. Assisting in any way I can to help protect this threatened species has not only become part of my job but a huge part of my life. Working closely with the Loon Preservation Committee has been and will continue to be an honor and privilege to be able to play a role in the protection and preservation of our loons. I continue and am confident that in the future we will watch these elegant aquatic birds not only survive but thrive. The Loon Preservation Committee’s commitment to their protection has been an inspiration on helping educate others about the importance of our common Loon to our lake’s ecosystem. Not only

does their protection play such a huge role in Ossipee Lake's survival, but there is also nothing more beautifully haunting than a loon's call echoing from the water on a peaceful summer morning. Thank you all for letting me be a part of their protection and survival of one of my favorite species ever."

Heather Kiley Executive Director, CCYMCA/Camp Huckins states:

"The presence of the loons around YMCA Camp Huckins is something our community has valued for nearly 100 years. Falling asleep to the loon calls at night is as much a part of our culture as island swims and camp songs. We have had a loon nest on Huckins Island every summer since 2021, and each summer campers and staff scan the lake daily, excited to get a glimpse of the loon baby. Then we watch over the family as the baby bird grows throughout the summer, almost like it's a part of Huckins camp! That is why we have adapted our activities to protect the loon nests, whether that be cancelling fireworks or staying off the island. It's always worth it once we see the baby swimming with its parents".

Dennis also mentions Robin Hood, Camp Marist, Marine Patrol, and dam control personnel as being essential partners. Without all of these people working together, Dennis doesn't believe the effort would be nearly as successful.

The Loon count is done every year on the same day and time in July throughout the State of NH. The Loonies are assigned bay and cove areas to search for the Loons and to document the sightings and the time. Although results from the one-hour count can vary from the tally of resident loons for the season, great care is taken not to misrepresent or double count. This year, 36 loon adults were counted during the census hour on Ossipee Lake, with 1 chick and 1 active nest.

This is a very significant decrease from the prior years. In the mid 1970s when the LPC organized the first statewide Loon Count, only 74 territorial pairs were counted throughout the State of NH. When you consider this fact, it is remarkable that we counted 36 adult loons on Ossipee Lake alone this July. But, the number of nests and chicks this past year was a disappointment. In 2024 we had 33 adults and 5 chicks. In 2025, we had 33 adults and 6 chicks with one nest still active.

High and inconsistent water levels were a concern this spring, and may have delayed or deterred loon nesting by flooding their usual sites. Dam repairs and close management in recent years have usually provided stable water levels during the summer season when loons are nesting, in the absence of major storms or drought. Although Dennis was in touch with the DES Dam Bureau in late spring to point out the potential impact to loons from observed high water levels, a review of the water levels and management considerations will be needed to understand how things played out in real time this year. Loon watchers and other stakeholders are now planning that discussion with the Dam Bureau this fall. Since the July loon census date, one other chick has hatched, and of this writing, both chicks are doing well and have fended off their normal predators, the eagle being the most formidable

The August evening potluck offered plenty of delicious food, but the conversation was the real feast. People who had never met before talked as though they were long-lost friends. This evening was an opportunity to meet one another and to connect with others who support loon protection. As the evening progressed, it quickly became apparent that there is something special about being surrounded by people who share your passion.

Among those joining the gathering were attendees from a number of lake conservation groups; the conservation commissions of Effingham and Freedom, representatives from Ossipee Lake Alliance and Friends of Ossipee Lake and John Cooley, Senior Biologist with the Loon Preservation Committee. What they all recognize is that the strength of the Loon population is dependent on a number of factors but it is generally indicative of the health of the lake habitat.



(Gloria Villari Photo)

After Charlene Becht and Dennis cut the cake that Dennis had brought as a gesture of appreciation for the volunteers, Dennis and John took questions from the group about Loons. One question seemed to lead to three more, and it was clear that the conversation could have continued well into the night. We are grateful to everyone who took time out of their busy Friday evening to come together and make the gathering so special.

Protecting a Loon Is Anything but Simple



(Photo Courtesy of Colleen Laurence)

As with so many things in life, what appears seamless and completely natural often depends on a complicated web of people, circumstances and careful decisions. Raising a loon chick is one of those things.

To visitors of Ossipee Lake—and to those who may not give it much thought—loons simply seem to belong here. They glide across the water, call to one another and raise their chicks as though it all happens effortlessly. Ossipee Lake seems blessed to have them. But is it luck? Or is it the result of years of hard work?

In the early 1900s, loons were common throughout New England and New Hampshire. It was estimated that there were approximately 450–600 nesting pairs in New Hampshire alone. But as human activity increased around loon nesting areas, the birds faced growing threats.

Acid rain and mercury contamination harmed fish populations, and the loons that depended on those fish were affected as well. Eggs were collected for amusement. Loons were shot for sport. Habitat was disturbed.

By the time the Loon Preservation Committee was founded in 1975, the estimated number of territorial pairs in New Hampshire had fallen to just 74. The Common Loon had become Endangered.

Today, protecting the Loons of Ossipee Lake requires constant attention and cooperation. Dennis Gould has spearheaded loon management efforts on the lake and works closely with LPC field

staff. Together, along with the Loonie Team and many other partners, they have developed and implemented a number of strategies to give the loons a better chance of surviving and raising their young.

Artificial Nesting Rafts

The Loonies have created and installed artificial nesting rafts to protect loon eggs from predators and from fluctuating water levels that can wash away nests and eggs.

Protecting Habitat

Volunteers install warning signs, establish buffer zones and monitor nesting areas in an effort to protect Loons from disturbance. Boats and curious visitors can unintentionally cause serious problems for a nesting pair.

Protecting Loons from Lead

In 2004, effective legislation was introduced to restrict the use of lead fishing tackle. This was critically important because lead sinkers can be deadly to loons. When ingested, a lead sinker can kill a loon within a matter of weeks. Before restrictions were enacted, lead sinkers accounted 48% of adult loon deaths.

The State of NH in Cooperation with the LPC has instituted a Lead Buy Back Program. Collect all your lead weights and sinkers and bring it to your nearest participating business and collect \$20 which should help you purchase better replacements.

Working with Marine Patrol

When a loon nest or family is being obviously disturbed, Marine Patrol may be called upon to intervene and, when necessary, educate boaters about the importance of keeping their distance.

Working with Dam Control

Water levels can make or break a loon nesting season.

Before a nest is established—and especially after an egg has been laid—consistent water levels are critical. A rapidly rising or falling water level can destroy a nest. Boats passing too close can also disrupt nesting birds, while wakes from larger or faster boats can cause additional damage even when the boat is otherwise operating within recommended distances.

For a loon pair, losing a nest can mean the end of their nesting attempt for that year.

Public Education

The Loonies also work to educate the public about loons, their behavior and the many ways that people can help protect them. The general rule is to stay 150 feet away and to use binoculars if you want to see better detail.

A Dedicated Volunteer Team

Perhaps most importantly, Dennis has assembled a dedicated team of volunteers who monitor loon families, watch nesting areas and help protect these remarkable birds throughout the season.

That team represents one of the greatest strengths of the Ossipee Lake Loon effort: **people working together.**

Like the Loons, They Come Together



(photo courtesy of Susan Marks)

Just as loons gather in the fall before beginning their migration toward the ocean for the winter, the loon volunteers gathered at Totem Pole Pavilion in 2026.

It was a beautiful evening on the western shore of the main lake, with a comfortable breeze moving across the water. Beyond the pavilion, adults played pickleball and socialized on the beach. Children played games and rode by on bicycles. Boats bobbed gently in the distance, and the shoreline glistened in the late-August evening light.

If anyone needed a reminder of why they do what they do, it was all around them.

The natural beauty of Ossipee is something that can never be replaced. Protecting it is a responsibility shared by everyone who loves this lake.

The Loonies will gather again next fall, as predictably as the changing seasons. They will celebrate their successes, mourn their losses and talk about what they can do differently in the year ahead.

Like the loons themselves, the members of this group are all unique individuals. But they understand something important: **their greatest strength lies in collaboration**—with one another, with the Loon Preservation Committee, with local officials and with all the people who care about the future of Ossipee Lake.

The loons may be the ones we see gliding across the water, but behind every successful nest is a remarkable group of people quietly working to make sure those loons have a future.

And that is anything but Loonie!

If you would like to become a Loonie volunteer and help protect the loons of Ossipee Lake, contact Dennis Gould at 617-257-4847.