

## COLUMNISTS

# The common loon is an extraordinary sight

**Mary Haney** Special to the Reporter-News

Published 5:00 p.m. CT Dec. 6, 2020

Aren't loons a northern bird often considered to be an icon of the north woods? So why the common loon for a Texas Master Naturalist article?

Because each winter they migrate south, sometimes flying as much as 670 miles in one day. They winter along both coasts of North America, Baja California and the Gulf Coast. Some loons may also winter on large inland lakes and reservoirs. Jay Packer, from the Abilene Audubon Society, had sightings on Lake Kirby in October to December of his Big Year, 2019.

**More:** Packing it up: Abilene birder Jay Packer soared with yearlong sighting project

The common loon is a beautiful bird that has distinct black and white plumage with a black head, red eyes and a checkerboard black and white body that is long and sleek with its feet positioned far back on its body. The feet position helps the loon with its superior diving ability, but it makes it extremely difficult walking on land. That is how the loon got its common name. According to Mark Lockwood in "Learn about ... Texas Birds," loon means "lame" in the language of the Shetland Islands where many loons breed. They look lame because they are so awkward on land!

Since walking on land is so difficult, the loon makes its nest near the water's edge. Their summer breeding habitats are wooded lakes in coniferous forest zones from April till late October. The nest is usually 2 feet in diameter made of soil, grasses and moss in a sheltered location near deep water.

Both parents are involved in the building of the nest and the incubating of the eggs. The adults mate for life and each summer have one or two olive-and-brown speckled eggs. Incubation is between 24 to 31 days.

The adults usually nest during their second year of life. Chicks have been seen riding along on their parent's backs, which they do to keep warm and avoid predators. The parents feed

their young whole food every hour for three months. The young learn to fly within two to three months.

Loons eat any fish species available, crustaceans, mollusks, aquatic insects, leeches, frogs and some aquatic vegetation. Their unusually solid bones contribute to their superior diving ability in finding food. They weigh between 6.5 and 12 pounds. They can dive more than 180 feet and can stay under water up to 5 minutes. Their unusual red eyes are believed to help them locate their prey underwater.

Loons also have an unusual takeoff out of the water. They face into the wind, and take off by flapping their wings and running across the top of the water until they become airborne. They must land in larger bodies of water to make that takeoff possible.

My favorite characteristic about the loon is its beautiful calls. We visit Minnesota almost every summer, and my favorite thing to do is sit on the dock and listen to the loons on the lake. The loon has several different songs or calls: yodels, hoots, wails and tremolos. Loud yodeling by the male is often territorial. They usually call during dusk and night time. I cherish the moments sitting by the lake listening to those calls.

Unfortunately, loons are seldom heard in their winter habitat because most of their calls are territorial for nesting and courtship in the north. Their winter plumage is also much different than their summer breeding look. It is basically the same plumage of an immature adult with a gray head and pale collar with a more grayish and white checkered back.

In our fall and winter months we need to be on the lookout for this beautiful bird on our larger Texas reservoirs and coast. I hope I can travel to Minnesota this summer and sit on the dock enjoying their beautiful calls.

*Mary Haney is a member of the Big Country Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists. Birds are just part of the great Texas outdoors that Master Naturalists enjoy and learn about. They are sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension. For information see <https://txmn.tamu.edu/> or on Facebook at BCTXMN.*