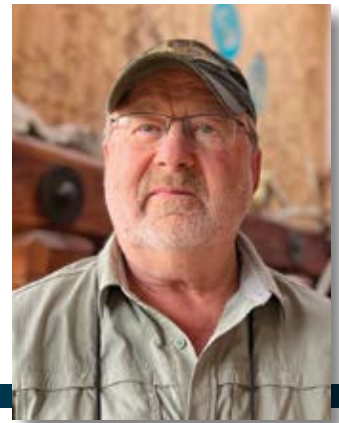


Death of a Loon



By David McIntyre

I knew she was doomed the moment I saw her. The only hope: Could she be rescued? An Arctic cold front had moved south and the loon, swimming in southwestern Alberta within a sliver of open water in mid-November, should have been long gone. What was wrong? Why hadn't she flown to safe coastal waters?

The loon, the only sign of life on the snow-covered lake, called out a haunting, forlorn, primordial cry. Seconds passed before the lake ice, expanding, responded with a hollow, whale-like reverberating bong that echoed across the land.

Day one

I, alone on shore amid an expanse of snow, looked across thin ice toward the swimming loon, then north toward the white, knife-edged crest of the Livingstone Range. What could I do?

My first thought was to contact Fish and Wildlife and area firefighters. The envisioned rescue of the loon appeared to be a golden opportunity for firefighters to gain valuable ice-rescue training as well as the perfect occasion to cash-in on a high-profile, good news story. My subsequent phone calls to firefighters opened the door to discussion and gave me reason to believe there was interest in pursuing the envisioned rescue. I, encouraged, offered sideline support and an inflatable raft as an added safety item. I then contacted Fish and Wildlife. The person answering the call seemed interested in the issue but didn't offer any help.

I made numerous inquiries that first day and returned to Lee Lake late in the afternoon to further assess the situation. When I arrived, I was surprised to see a Government of Alberta truck parked

close to the lake. I parked behind it and walked over to the driver's side to talk with a conservation officer, a young man who was watching the swimming loon. An adult bald eagle, perched in a nearby tree, was also on watch. Six eyes were focused on the icebound loon.

When I mentioned the threat of eagle predation, the officer told me he hadn't seen any eagles. I pointed. The officer, acknowledging the sighting, told me another loon had been seen the previous day in a similar bathtub-sized splash of open water on nearby Beauvais Lake, and that bird, no longer present, may have flown away. This, I knew, didn't ring true. Loons can't fly from a virtual bucket of water. They, like seaplanes, require a

long, open-water runway. The Beauvais Lake loon was almost certainly dead.

Very few loons nest in southwestern Alberta, a southern outlier of their breeding range, and the realization that two rare birds on two rare nesting lakes were similarly trapped was deeply disturbing. Why hadn't these loons flown to freedom before the lakes froze?

The loon in front of us, imprisoned, was actively swimming, and diving, and looked to be the picture of health. What was wrong? What caused her to stay when her mate flew away?

Loons require relative solitude and don't tolerate much in the way of human disturbance. Where loons exist, they inject a brand of Northwoods magic into



Autumn gold. Lee Lake in mid-October, the day Monica and David first noticed the presence of a single, lingering loon. Photo © David McIntyre.



The Lee Lake loon, moments before Monica and David, converging on her from opposite directions, were able to capture her. Photo © David McIntyre.

the land and its waterways. Their soul-stirring calls cut through the stillness and speak to the raw, quintessential essence of ecological integrity. Whenever loons add their evocative magic to lakeshore environments, the land resonates with life. It feels intact. Beauvais Lake and Lee Lake, each supporting one breeding pair of common loons in recent years, have contributed to the birds' presence on this landscape and enriched the lives of lakeside communities. Dark clouds now obscure the future.

Loons are typically seven years old before they breed. They nest on lakes

where ice-free summers are short.

Incubation of eggs takes nearly a month, and the young require three long months to fledge. Loons, like grizzly bears, might live as long as 30 years, but they're slow to mature and breed, and when they do, the number of young they produce is small. A pair of breeding loons can be expected to produce no more than two chicks each year. One might survive. Fifty percent of all loon nests fail to fledge a single bird. The untimely death of a breeding loon on a southwestern Alberta lake is a colossal loss. Its impact could — forever — erase loons from that lake.

The conservation officer and I, on the shore of Lee Lake at the end of that cold November day, looked out across an expanse of ice to the swimming loon where, earlier in the year, I'd watched the lake's breeding loons nest and begin to raise two young. I don't believe either chick survived.

Adult bald eagles, the most obvious threat to young loons, can be seen in the area throughout the year. One pair nests in a large Douglas-fir overlooking Lee Lake. Eagle predation is, of course, a natural threat. What I was to learn suggests that fishing and, in particular, motorized trolling, appear likely to be the greatest threat to loon survival on a small lake — such as Lee Lake — where this activity is intense. Beauvais Lake is in this same lethal boat. Do trollers worry that their trailing lines and life-threatening hooks might snag a loon and cause it to suffer through weeks of pain, impaired mobility, and infection ... and silence its wailing cries?

The loon we watched that cold November day was an adult female, almost certainly the same loon that, earlier in the year, had nested on Lee Lake. I knew none of this as I, shivering, stood braced against a stiff wind while looking out at the swimming, icebound loon. The picture, still in the darkroom, was just beginning to develop.

Common loons, striking in appearance, flaunt white-on-black star-like plumage and are further adorned with iridescent green-black heads, red eyes, and a stunning necklace of white. They evolved as diving specialists. Virtually unable to walk on land, they're pure poetry underwater. feathered torpedoes powered by large, webbed feet set far back on a long, heavy body. Loons weigh approximately the same as eagles, and their bills are lethal — lightning-fast — daggers. Fish are a loon's primary prey.

Loons, perhaps best known for their spellbinding open-water sonatas, capture and convey the pulse of a lakeside forest's cryptic shadows, the magical allure of the unknown. There, where fascination meets fear and enchantment, loons inject frantic wails, tremolos, and poignant cries that dance and echo across the water. Calling

loons generate a sense of wilderness that, especially at dawn and dusk, sends a cascade of cold water down your spine, freezes the action of your canoe paddle, and steals your gaze from a lakeside campfire.

Loons, while garnering national attention and a special place in the hearts of lakeside communities that share habitation, are threatened by human activity, particularly shoreline development and the impact of recreational watercraft. Eggs are washed out of nests, critical habitat is lost, lead poisoning from ingested sinkers takes a toll, and nest site disturbance drives loons away. Loons that nest on use-intensive recreational lakes live at the outside edge of their tolerance for the impact of people. When loons are encountered in these high-stress environments, they need to be given ample room. People fishing must learn to remove their lines from the water whenever loons are in close proximity.

Days two and three

I arrived at the lakeshore each day at dawn and watched as the loon swam and dove, her intense activity keeping the small teardrop of open water ice-free despite the bitterly cold temperature.

How well could she see under the lake's overriding layer of ice and snow? Presumably well enough to catch fish and bring them to the surface. One of the fish the loon captured was a trout that seemed too large for her to swallow. I watched with binoculars as she, repeatedly, attempted to grab and swallow the trout while wind and wave action made it appear the trout would be lost under the ice, but the loon, beating the odds at the downwind lip of ice, finally lifted the trout from the water and swallowed it. A note of optimism resonated in the bitter, wintry air.

Meanwhile, my phone calls to firefighters had, frustratingly, failed to gain any rescue-supporting traction, and my calls to Fish and Wildlife had hit a brick wall. I'd talked with at least three different officers where the response was simple, consistent, and direct: "Let nature take its course." I sensed that firefighters, in obvious contact with Fish and



David, fighting to maintain control, holds the struggling loon moments after her capture, just before she was slipped into a zippered coat for transportation to waiting veterinarian. Photo © David McIntyre.

Wildlife, were being directed to stand on the sidelines, keeping me at arm's length. After three days at the lake and hours of frigid phone calls, I was no closer to coordinating an ice-rescue support team than I had been when I'd first spotted the icebound loon.

Daylight faded as the loon swam in her tiny sliver of open water, and the Arctic cold front intensified its grip on the land. There was, however, a soft glimmer of hope within the day's long shadows: The Alberta Institute for Wildlife Conservation (AIWC) reported that the loon, if rescued, would be accepted, her health assessed and, if necessary, she'd

be kept through the winter months for a spring release.

Day four

I arrived at the lakeshore at first light. The temperature was -18°C. The lake, under a soft carpet of overnight snow, was a solid sheet of ice. The loon's former sliver of open water was gone.

The loon, on the ice, was surrounded by two adult bald eagles and three ravens. The eagles, facing the loon, pecked at her head as the ravens attacked from her rear. The loon, encircled and caught in the center of a virtual knife fight, spun, and stabbed at her attackers. The situation

looked dire. I parked quickly and, waving my arms, ran toward the lake. The eagles and ravens took to the air. Thirty long, bitterly cold minutes passed as the loon, wearing a coating of ice, remained relatively motionless.

I called Fish and Wildlife where I received the same “let nature take its course” message coupled with a stern footnote: If I attempted to rescue the loon by myself, I could fall through the ice. The comment, valid as an uninformed evaluation of any on-ice rescue attempt, didn’t reflect a current and experienced assessment of the lake’s ice. I knew it was likely to be dangerously thin where the loon had been swimming, but I also knew, due to successive nights of extreme cold, the ice was safe closer to shore.

As I stood there, alone and feeling helpless, the loon did the last thing I expected her to do. She, in labored

wingbeats, propelled herself forward — toward me — for five metres, then another five, then ten. The altered picture cracked a window of hope. When the loon added another ten metres of known ice-safety to the equation, I, moving quickly, walked out on the ice and, circling behind the loon, advanced toward her and toward shore. When I had approached to within a metre, I, crouching, dove to grab her. She, sensing this move, was able to elude my grasp, flap past me and, disturbingly, propel herself farther out onto the ice. Reassessing the situation, I knew I, alone, wasn’t likely to be successful.

I walked off the ice, called my wife (Monica) at home, and asked her to come with a coat and several tie-down straps. Thirty minutes later she was at my side. We, on the lakeshore, positioned ourselves east and west of the loon,

then walked out onto the ice to a point beyond her. There, under a veil of ice fog, we turned around and, facing the loon, listened to her heart-rending, hopeless cries as they echoed in the stillness of overnight snowfall. We carried the weight of knowing we were the loon’s last chance for survival as we, converging, advanced toward her.

I’ve rescued more than a few horned and western grebes and one common loon from their nighttime crash-landings on wet roadways that, to airborne birds in rain or snow, look like open water, but are, in fact, lethal deathtraps from which the birds — needing a long open-water runway — can’t fly.

While I had this experience in my back pocket, I also knew that no amount of knowledge or training prepares a person, already stiff and cold, for an on-the-ice dive toward a loon who, fighting for her life, has a lethal, dagger-like bill and the strength to drive it home. There’s always an element of luck involved, and I was lucky in my first Monica-supported dive, able to get a gloved hand on the loon’s neck and turn her head and breast away from me as I restrained her wings, pinning them to her body.

The loon fought a good fight, but Monica and I were able to slide her into a zipped-up coat with her head emerging from the hood. The coat’s arms were crossed and tied. The loon, straight-jacketed, was further secured with three strategically placed straps.

When the phone rang a few minutes later, my hands were free and I answered it. An unknown male identifying himself by only his first name — I later learned he was a Fish and Wildlife officer — asked if I had captured the loon. I responded, saying I had. I was then told I was in illegal possession of protected wildlife, subject to arrest, and asked for my location. My response was polite but firm. I told the caller I was too busy trying to save the life of the loon to talk further, that I wasn’t going to provide my location, and hung up. I then drove to Nanton, where a veterinary clinic would be entrusted to care for the loon until, later that same day, she would be placed in the capable hands of staff from the AIWC.



The loon had lethal, debilitating wounds caused by fishing hooks, wire, and multiple loops of tightly-bound fishing line. Photo © Alberta Institute for Wildlife Conservation.

During the loon's capture, I saw a fishing lure and fishing line wound tightly around one of the loon's wings. The discovery suggested that the fishing gear, while it had seemingly prevented the loon from flying, could be removed by capable veterinary staff. This vision was supported by the loon's ability to catch and eat fish, her profound strength, and her ability to defend herself against attacking eagles and ravens.

That evening, while optimistic and hopeful, and fortified with the vision that I might be present for the loon's envisioned springtime release on Lee Lake, I received a message from the AIWC. I learned that, sadly, and tragically, the loon was dead. Bottom line: Nature didn't take its course. Barbed hooks, wire-and-metal lures, and tightly wrapped fishing line — lethal loon killers — had taken a deadly toll. The AIWC provided me with photos of its examination of the loon and reported that she'd been impaled by two separate fishing hooks, that the resultant damage was substantially more than staff had anticipated.

The comprehensive exam was performed with the loon fully sedated and included x-rays, revealing that the loon was suffering from life-threatening injuries. The most extensive of two wound sites was a fishing line entanglement in which line was wrapped tightly around the humerus, radius, and ulna (elbow joint). There, wire and fishing line were so tightly embedded it had led to extensive nerve damage, as well as necrosis. Because of a lack of blood supply, tissue had started to decay, and the patagium had become shortened and locked.

The infection caused by necrosis had spread along the loon's wing and into her major organs. The amount of tissue and bone death made it impossible for the loon to recover. It was thought she would survive no more than two weeks before succumbing to the infection. An AIWC veterinarian made the difficult decision to humanely euthanize the loon to ensure she did not continue to suffer.

The loss of the loon brought tears. Her death, like the tragic, recent deaths of a sow grizzly and her two cubs —

bears that, daily, lived, fed, and played within our home's viewscape — weighs heavily on Monica and me. How long had the female loon lived and bred on Lee Lake? How many chicks had she fledged? Would her death result in the disappearance of breeding loons from the lake?

Monica, almost immediately upon learning of the loon's death, wrote a poem and song in response to the grief-laden, heartbreaking saga. I had to wait longer, let more water flow under the bridge before attempting to convey the gravity of the story in words.

Ending on an up-note

As winter gave way to spring and ice melted on Beauvais Lake and Lee Lake, I, worried amid thoughts of what I might not see, walked at the water's edge.

When just one loon appeared on Lee Lake, I held my breath. Several days later, a second loon appeared. As I write in late May, paired loons are present on both lakes. A note of unanticipated optimism is in the air.

Epilogue

Monica and I have a decades-long love affair with Beauvais Lake and Lee Lake. We launch canoes on both lakes frequently, usually targeting calm mornings when we have the lakes to ourselves. We also walk the lakeshores. There, we've had the opportunity to look out at nesting eagles and loons, foraging grizzly bears, and diving ospreys. While we've enjoyed days of solitude on and near these lakes, we've also witnessed times when dozens of boats, many of them trailing multiple fishing lines, are on the water.

I hadn't given serious thought to boats with their trailing lines and hooks as a lethal threat to loons until this vision — seen within the rescued loon's post-mortem — suddenly loomed large, and appeared likely to be the most plausible cause for a loon's entanglement with fishing gear.

The picture: There are times when the density of pontoon boats and other boats trailing fishing lines on these small lakes is — if you're thinking about the welfare

of diving loons—disturbingly high. Logic [hopefully] suggests that people fishing will reel in their lines whenever they are in close proximity to diving loons, but do they?

What is the future for common loons on Beauvais Lake and Lee Lake? To know at least two loons died on these lakes during the past year — a number that represents 50 percent of the lakes' known breeding loon population — is to know the future is far from secure. Will mature loons arrive to fill the void? No one knows.

Throughout Alberta, resource managers, biologists, park staff, and enforcement officers need to do more to protect vulnerable water's-edge nesting habitat and reduce the recreational footprint of lakeshore users. Snarls of discarded fishing line and other fishing gear cannot be tolerated. And people fishing need to think — and act — beyond their desire to catch fish. Diving loons can't be expected to survive a deadly web of trailing lines and lethal hooks.

Loons serve as a living litmus test revealing the outer edge of a lake's raw and tenuous ecological integrity. They are mirrors exposing the health of their surroundings. Loons in southwestern Alberta are living in great danger, breeding near the absolute edge of their range. Where they exist, they act as bellwethers, supersized canaries that work the waterways beyond yesterday's underground coal mines.

The bottom line: Loons need your help if future generations are to be given the gift of hearing their haunting calls and witnessing their spellbinding injections of wilderness magic.

David McIntyre lives on the land he loves in the storied headwaters of southwestern Alberta's Oldman River. He has passionate interest and knowledge in diverse natural history disciplines and is a strong advocate for the long-range economic and ecological worth of intact landscapes. David holds a Masters of Science from the University of Washington (College of the Environment) and, for decades, led multi-day study tours for the Smithsonian Institution — via hiking and white-water rafting trips — throughout the U.S. West and the Canadian Rockies. 🐾