



# MONTEREY NEWS

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## Ancient Loons on Wilderness Lakes

The common Loon is a very ancient species. Their earliest predecessors go back seventy million years. They have become a beloved symbol of the wild lakes where they live now.

As in my illustration, loons swim very low in the water, partially submerged, and propel themselves with churning webbed feet. They are relatively dense, with almost solid bones, resulting in low buoyancy, so they can easily dive and stay submerged for long distances. Their ability to stay submerged and swim fast makes them very successful hunters. They cannot stand or walk upright on dry land by themselves. To become airborne from the water they need a very long start, literally running on the surface of the water building speed to get into the air. With insufficient distance available they can become stranded in the attempt. In flight they stretch out with their long necks and bills, and a tail contour that streamlines the air for maximum lift.

The calls of the Loon echo across the placid evening surfaces. The calls are very clear coming through the darkness but are not easy to locate. There is the startling yodeling alarm that ripples through a peaceful silence when humans get too close to the nest. It is accentuated by a sudden wild flapping of wings against chest to insure terror in the intruding predators. Even more soulful on a dark night is their eerie wail to locate a missing mate as the sun goes down. Henry David Thoreau at Walden Pond told his friends it was the most un-earthly sound he had ever heard.

A reproductive pair of Loons re-



quire at least one-third of a mile across clear and clean waters to ensure success. They nest along undisturbed shores just above the waterline. This helps the chicks get into the water within hours after hatching. As lakes get busier with motorized boats, the nests can be seriously threatened by the wake and wash of watercraft. Once in the water the young can be seen getting free rides on the backs of their parents. Like many young birds juvenile Loons soon learn to become independent when mom and dad leave them behind to head off on migration in autumn. Instead of a north to south direction, they migrate from west to east to spend winters in the coastal salt waters. They soon lose their dramatic summer black-and-white plumage pattern. Once the juveniles settle in the coastal oceans they tend to stay there for the next two years.

— George B. Emmons