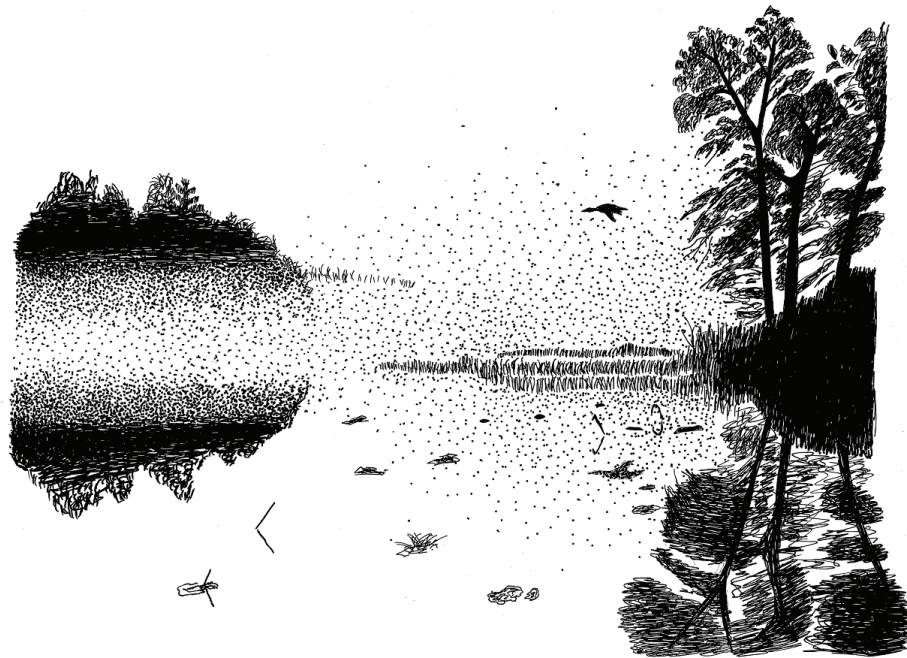


Common Loon

Gavia immer



A loon sighting at the cabin was rare throughout my childhood. We assumed the lake was too small for loons because they require a substantial aquatic runway to lift their heavy, densely-boned bodies from the water. Or, maybe the lake was big enough but the coffee-colored water obscured their vision and made

Timothy Goodwin

hunting too difficult. Perhaps there were not adequate nesting sites to keep eggs safe from predators such as mink and raccoons. Whatever the reason, it was always a disappointment each spring when the cabin was opened, the ice out, the ducks and geese returned, but no loons. Occasionally, if we were lucky, a loon call would echo through the cool air at dusk as a stray loon visited the lake or simply flew overhead.

Is it possible not to be awed by the unusual and varied sounds of the loon? I always stop and listen when I hear them calling to one another. There are four types of loon calls: the soft, short hoot used to communicate with other loons about location; the wavering tremolo, sounding to some like a crazy laugh, used to communicate alarm or simply to announce the loon's presence; the yodel, a male territorial call which starts with three notes and ends with a swinging phrase unique to each caller; and the long, haunting wail, used to locate a partner and move closer together, like children playing Marco Polo in a pool. Though behavioral biologists have concluded the purpose of these four types of calls, I often think that it is with a mixture of hubris and ignorance that we draw such conclusions. We dismiss the lower animals' ability to communicate because of our own idea of communication and therefore we only try to describe their communication in terms that we understand. I suspect there may be complexities and subtleties to the loon's communication we miss entirely. For me it is enough that, from the distinct laugh to an imitation of a wolf pack, nothing says "Northwoods" better than two loons calling to one another from opposite sides

Within These Woods

of a lake as the day comes to a close, sun setting and first stars appearing in the twilight.

The first loon I saw at the cabin was more like a ghost. I was in the middle of the lake, alone in a canoe, surrounded by dense fog as the midsummer sun rose over the tall pines at the eastern edge of the lake. I heard the loon fly by. They are not silent flyers; their solid bones make them heavy enough to require high flapping rates to stay aloft. Then I heard the distinct loon call, and I think I saw its ghostly silhouette against the rising sun. Then it was gone.

The loon was ghost-like to the Ojibwe as well. They called the loon *Mang*, or “the most handsome of birds.” Some believed the loon’s haunting cry was an omen of death. In some legends, the loon has magical powers or serves as a messenger of power.

They are certainly powerful birds. The dense bones that make them such troubled flyers also make them superb divers—an essential trait for gathering food. They float by trapping air in their feathers, then let out the air and sink slowly until, with a push of their hind legs and an arch of their backs, they dive head-first under the water. Once under the water, they are graceful swimmers, propelling themselves with their feet, wings tucked to their sides, quickly changing direction and catching prey, and using their sight to spy the flashes of sunlight reflecting off fish scales.

The evolution of these attributes that allow grace and ease in water has minimized the loon’s terrestrial adaptation. Because their legs are far back on

Timothy Goodwin

their bodies, it takes a great deal of effort to simply raise their breasts up off the ground. Walking up on shore is laborious enough, let alone building an intricate nest, thus they make nests which are really just mounds of sticks and mud near the shore.

In the last few years, a pair of loons has been nesting on the lake, and it is common to see them most of the summer out on the water, fishing, diving, and carrying their chicks on their back. My perspective on the presence of the loons only highlights the limitations of our concept of time within an ecosystem. It could be that loons come and go, with cycles of habitation that might last decades or even centuries. Why they have chosen these recent years to take up habitation on this lake I do not know.

Whether or not the loons remain inhabitants of this lake, I am glad for the opportunity to share this space with them, even if only for a short time. The loon teaches me that natural selection is all about compromise. In this case, grace and ease in the water come at the expense of terrestrial comfort. I suppose such evolutionary compromises are always the case. Relationships between family and friends, economic systems, and the workings of a clumsy democratic government are littered with impressive adaptations but also maladaptive compromises and unintended consequences. This is the nature of all systems and relationships it would seem. Though the result might be a water bird ill-equipped for land, family members having to learn the importance of giving one another grace, or elected officials having to accept other opin-

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ions, to do otherwise results in evolutionary dead ends, split families, and non-functioning government, the lesson would seem to be that holding intently onto an ideological position, just like holding onto a physical adaptation beyond the point of practicality, can only result in one thing: extinction.

