

Calling All Loons

By Misty Edgecomb, Bangor Daily News

The water was smooth as glass, with nearly a ripple to indicate a dive, but Jane Brann knew that the loons were close. Every morning Brann kayaks this placid stretch of Cold Stream Pond in Enfield. And every morning she encounters the big black-and-white birds whose uncanny songs are the very spirit of a Maine summer.



But on Saturday, the day of the 22nd annual Maine Audubon loon count, Brann cruised around in her kayak, squinting into the early morning sun and scanning the shorelines for the designated half-hour to no avail. Time's up at 7:30am The first slick black head rose from the pone at precisely 7:36. "I think they know the loon count is between 7 and 7:30, because they all come out at 8 o'clock," said Susan Gallo, who coordinates the loon program for Audubon.

This year, nearly 1,000 volunteers were up early, hoping to spot the loons that have serenaded them on Maine's lakes and ponds all season. Audubon estimates the state's adult loon population at 4,300 adults, by far the largest in New England.

It's a healthy population, but scientists know that Maine loons face lead poisoning from now illegal sinkers left behind by fishermen, as well as from some of the highest levels of mercury contamination in America. "Basically, [the count] is a reassurance for us that the loons are continuing to do well in Maine," Gallo said. "Because they're not endangered or threatened, they sometimes get ignored."

Decades of data from the 'citizen scientists' who conduct the loon count suggest that the number of chicks is slowly declining and that the adult loon population may have reached a plateau-despite the fact that prime habitat remains unused. By the 25th anniversary of the count in 2008, Gallo hopes to formally analyze the numbers, teasing out trends that biologists could use to protect the beloved birds. We're sitting on a lot of information," Gallo said. Cold Stream Pond is believed to have about a dozen loon territories, each offering a breeding pair a haven for raising chicks.

Although the well known story of loons mating for life is false, they are remarkably loyal, both to the partners that they may join for as long as a decade and to the ponds where they return year after year. Last July, counters on Cold Stream Pond saw 25 adults and 3 chicks. With partial results in on Sunday afternoon, this year's numbers looked to be similar, though residents haven't seen many chicks on the lake this summer, according to Sue Harvey, who organizes volunteers from the Cold Stream Camp Owners' Association.



Twenty minutes after the count officially ended Saturday morning, Brann spotted eight of these loons-all zebra-plumed breeding males- swimming in a line, as though parading across the pond. She imitated the birds' famed tremolo call, and the loons answered in chorus- a giddy babble that echoed across the lake. Some nature guides refer to the peculiar sight as a "gathering" Brann jokingly calls it a "camp town meeting".

As summer begins to fade into fall, the loons gather in the evenings, preparing for their annual mass migration to the ice-free waters of the Atlantic. "I counted a dozen one night. I was trying to figure out what was going on when they just disappeared, she said. "They seem to get together in the fall to plan what they're doing in the winter." In



Brann's lakeside home, photographs of her five grandchildren compete for wall space with loon-bedecked paraphernalia. "I just love the loons," said Brann, who has been participating in the count since she moved to the pond full time in 1996. "People like Brann are the reason the count has been so successful for so many years," Gallo said. "The count connects with people," Gallo said, estimating that 50 Mainers have volunteered without fail for at least two decades. "Once people get engaged, they usually stay with us," she said.

Gathering for coffee and scones on Sue Harvey's deck, the other residents of Cold Stream Pond who rose at the crack of dawn to complete their count shared their attraction to Maine's most famous bird. "They're so mysterious," Harvey said. Others spoke of watching the birds "fly" through the water as they torpedo toward a fish, or listening to their calls as the sun goes down-the eerie lullaby of Maine. "They're kind of the sign of summer," said Julie Nadeau. "If the loons are here, summer is on its way."