

BIRD SONGS

Newsletter of the
Discovery Center Bird Club



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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

John Randolph

The Eleventh Annual Northwoods Birding Festival was a truly enjoyable experience, as it always has been for me, whatever the weather conditions. I do remember skipping the early morning warbler walks the first several years, but now I look forward to getting up in the dark if it means going to some interesting natural setting to see and hear some birds. This year, Heather Lumpkin was in charge of the Festival, and did an excellent job.

In 2006, the Wisconsin Society for Ornithology published the Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Wisconsin, an impressive product of an amazing undertaking. Now, a number of our Bird Club members are engaged in a just begun (five year) project to create an updated second edition. Birders have volunteered to be in charge of surveying in each county, including finding volunteers. My experience regarding nesting has been for the most part limited to seeing fledglings being fed on our deck railing by seemingly harried parents – Hairy, Red-headed, and Pileated Woodpeckers, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Orioles, among others. We have flower containers with coconut matting attached to our deck, and have watched various species pull out fibers for their nest building (these mats are getting thin). This March, we've seen Pine Siskins pulling fibers, but despite the fact that they're still here in numbers, we haven't seen any feeding of youngsters. Two days ago, I saw a loon sitting on a rough pile of sticks on the end of a pier in a quiet bay in the lake across from us. Her partner was right there in the water (the pier was not far above the surface of the lake). The people who own the pier have a small cabin, and are seldom there, even in the summer. However, I have not seen the loon there since, which I interpret to mean she said "Thanks, but this simply will not do!"

Very happily, Donna Roche has agreed to continue to be in charge of the great weekly outings the Club goes on from April to October, though several members will be planning some of the bird hikes.

Knowing from my own experience that it's nice to be retired and able to go on regular weekday morning birding hikes all over northern Wisconsin (with occasional trips to central and even southern parts) and that getting up early can be an acquired taste, I hope that the Bird Club will be joined by a steady number of new members in the coming years. For us, birding is an activity that adds to the quality of life that Karin and I enjoy, and I believe that it contributes to our overall health.

HOME IS WHERE THE NEST IS—NATURAL OR ARTIFICIAL

Nesting Platforms on the Manitowish River chain of lakes

By David Foster



Photo by Dennis Dorow

If you're a loon, finding a place to raise a family isn't easy. It needs to be just right: a nice spot on a shoreline, not in a flood zone, safe from marauders, located in a quiet neighborhood. The process usually entails coming back to the same lake and hoping to meet up with the same partner (loon pairs winter separately but tend to hook up again in the old neighborhood if they make it back). Then the search begins-- looking at the choices, talking it over with your partner, and beating the competition to the right place.

This lifestyle has worked well for Wisconsin loons in the last twenty years. The estimated adult loon population is above 4000 in the 2010 statewide census, taken every five years by Project LoonWatch of Northland College. However, while the adult loon number is up, the estimated number of chicks in 2010 is down from 2005, and it is not clear why. Researchers think that since larger numbers of loons are competing for nesting sites, there is more loon-on-loon aggression, and many pairs settle for lower-quality nesting places—ones more subject to flooding, human disturbance, or predation by raccoons, mink, snapping turtles, and eagles.

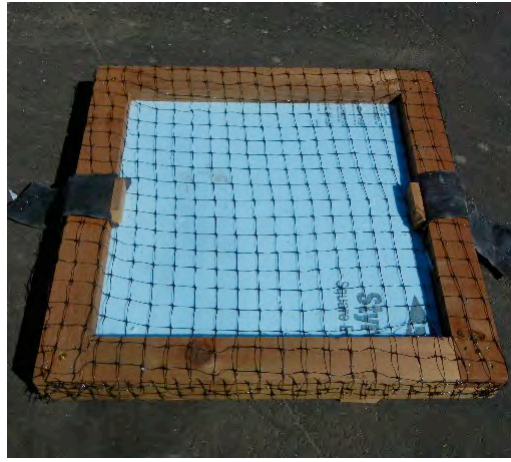


So if there aren't enough natural nesting sites for loon pairs, what can humans do about it? The first, best choice, says LoonWatch, is to “enhance natural nesting sites” by protecting them with “no-wake” signs and urging lakeside owners to leave shorelines natural (with reeds, hummocks, native vegetation) for good nest sites. But what if, on a particular lake, loons often nest but are not successful--predators plunder the eggs or hatchlings, water levels fluctuate heavily, or there aren't enough good natural sites?

Here the answer may be to try artificial nesting platforms. Such platforms have been used and studied for more than two decades, and have proven to increase loon nesting success on lakes with poor nesting history. An extensive 2002 study of lakes in Oneida County, Wisconsin, showed that “platforms are a practical means of increasing hatching and fledging rates” of loon nestings. The key advantage of platforms is that they reduce predation by raccoons and other animals: on natural nests only 49% of nesting attempts produced hatched eggs, while 83% of platform nesting attempts produced hatchlings--a 69% increase resulting from platform nests. This advantage continued in the fledging stage, with 56% chicks being fledged from natural nests compared to 74% of chicks being fledged from platform nests—a 32% increase.¹

After careful study of conditions on the Manitowish River chain of lakes, the Wisconsin DNR approved several lakes on the chain for artificial platforms. As Heather Lumpkin, Research and Monitoring Coordinator of the North Lakeland Discovery Center, says, “This project will install, maintain, and monitor 8 new artificial loon nesting platforms on the Manitowish Chain,” in partnership with the DNR, USGS, and Project LoonWatch. Mike Meyer, a DNR scientist with long experience studying loons in Wisconsin, provided years of loon research data crucial to selecting lakes for this project.

¹ W.H. Piper et al. *Biological Conservation* 104 (2002) 199–203 201, p. 202.



Framing the Platform

A loon housing project—aka an artificial nesting platform-- begins as a three-foot square Styrofoam pad with cedar frames, netting and “chick slides” giving young ones easier access. Then the frame and other components are loaded into a pickup truck and ferried to the nest site. The photos below show the nest being constructed on Alder Lake near Manitowish Waters.



Adding dirt



“Furnishing” the Platform

After packing soil into the bottom of the frame, vegetation is added—mostly leatherleaf and sphagnum moss, with white pine and small boggy shrubs added.



Making It Look Like Home!



Moored about 10 Feet from Shore

Lengths of cord are stretched between the slim wooden poles at each corner to protect the nest from eagles, while the open water between the nest and the shore provide protection from raccoons and other predators.

The final stage of the program is to monitor the nesting platform weekly to see if a loon nests on it, whether eggs are incubated and hatched, and whether chicks are raised successfully. The North Lakeland Discovery Center hopes to monitor the platforms for at least 5 years during the nesting season, with the help of volunteers. It may take a few years for the loons to start using them. Loon nesting productivity with platforms will be compared to baseline nesting productivity data collected by Mike Myers for loons on the chain. If more loon chicks are hatched and fledged with the platforms, the project will be considered a success.

Birding in Costa Rica

Elizabeth Stone and Dick Thiele

In early February, we took a vacation to Costa Rica and Panama. Although our trip was not strictly a birding tour, the birding was fantastic, and the local guides were extremely knowledgeable about the flora and fauna of the rainforest. It was amazing to see some of the neotropical migrants which summer in the Northwoods in their winter habitat, and to marvel at the distances they travel each year. One of our birding highlights occurred in Soberania National Park, Panama, where we climbed an observation tower to look down on the rainforest

canopy. A blue dacnis had built a nest in the canopy just a couple feet from the stairs of the observation tower! This small passerine is a member of the tanager family. Dick was able to get some great photos of the nesting bird included below.

