Common Loon - Gavia immer

Abundance: Uncommon

Status: NSS1 (Aa) NatureServe: G5 S1B,S2N

Population Status: population size and distribution are restricted and extirpation is possible; limited ability to increase distribution in the state; unique, southern-most nesting population in North America; nesting population of approximately 30 pairs is limited to northwestern Wyoming and is disjunct by over 200 miles from the closest separate population

Limiting Factor: Habitat (and Human Activity): limiting factors are severe and continue to increase in severity; habitat suitability is negatively affected by on-going and increasing incompatible human recreation and climate change; highly sensitive to human disturbance during nesting

Comment:

Introduction

The Common Loon breeds in Iceland, Greenland, and throughout the lake country of the northern US and Canada and winters along the Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf Coasts. Its range in Wyoming is small; although it is found on lakes across most of Wyoming during migration, it nests only in northwestern Wyoming. The Common Loon has low abundance in Wyoming and is considered an uncommon summer resident. Common Loons have nested or attempted to nest on 28 lakes in Wyoming, seven of which are located outside of Yellowstone National Park (YNP). The number of adult loons that are typically found in Wyoming during the breeding season, both within and outside of YNP, ranges from 40 to 60. However, because of their secretive nature and use of remote lakes, loons may also occupy suitable habitat that has not been surveyed for nesting territories.

Habitat

Lakes that are suitable for breeding are extremely limited in Wyoming and must have the following characteristics: At least 4 ha (10 ac), although reproductive success is better on lakes that are greater than 10 ha (25 ac); Free of human disturbance or have areas that are secluded from human activity; Between 1800 and 2400 m (6000 and 8000 ft) in elevation; Have clear water with a minimum visibility of 3 to 4 m (10 to 13 ft), as loons are visual predators; Islands or protected shore areas for nesting and raising young; Abundant populations of small to mid-sized fish; Greater than 2 m (6 ft) deep to prevent winter kill of fish; and remain ice free for at least 4 months to allow young to fledge; and Ideal nesting lakes also generally have at least partially forested, rocky shorelines; an area of shallow water with emergent vegetation; and a steep slope adjacent to the shoreline for an underwater approach to the nest.

Problems

- Narrow nesting habitat requirements makes species susceptible to habitat degradation and loss.
- Breeding habitat is restricted in Wyoming and may be declining.
- Breeding population in Wyoming is only about 20 pairs, making this population vulnerable to extirpation without adequate management.
- Very sensitive to human disturbances, which may cause desertion of the nest or chicks.
- Nests may be flooded by boat wakes or rising water, while lake level subsidence can move the shoreline too far from nests and cause nest desertion or loss of newly-hatched chicks.
- May be impacted by acid rain and other environmental contaminants, which kill fish that are used as food.

Conservation Actions

- Continue annual inventory and monitoring efforts to ensure that Common Loon territorial pairs are returning to and producing young on lakes with suitable breeding habitat.
- Continue coordinating surveys with YNP to allow direct comparison of annual breeding data and the development of joint management schemes between WGFD and YNP.
- Identify and survey additional potential breeding sites where this species has not been documented before to avoid focusing management on only a portion of the population.
- Manage all current and traditional nesting sites to minimize the potential for degradation and conflicts with development. Because this species exhibits strong fidelity to previous nest sites, there is a high probability that they will reuse nests and nurseries if these areas are not developed or degraded. When possible, 2 or 3 alternate sites with characteristics of preferred nesting areas should be protected on each breeding lake. Small islands should receive complete protection from development. Undeveloped buffer zones of at least 150 m (500 ft) should be left on either side of nest sites and nursery areas.
- Manage nesting areas to minimize human disturbance during the breeding season. Where necessary, identify and resolve potential conflicts with activities such as boating, fishing, swimming, camping, and picnicking near nest sites and in nursery areas.
- Maintain stable water levels throughout the nesting season in lakes where this species is breeding.
- Maintain good water quality.
- Educate the public about the natural history and conservation needs of loons. This can include interpretive signs and information at lakeside campsites, marinas, and other lake access points; informational brochures; press releases; and lectures, slide programs, and other presentations.

Monitoring/Research

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Recent Developments

Additional recreation pressure, particularly from from outfitters and associated incompatible human activities and disturbance, appears to be degrading the solitude needed for successful nesting and negatively affecting loon productivity during the past several years, particularly 2003, 2005, 2007, 2008, and 2009.

References

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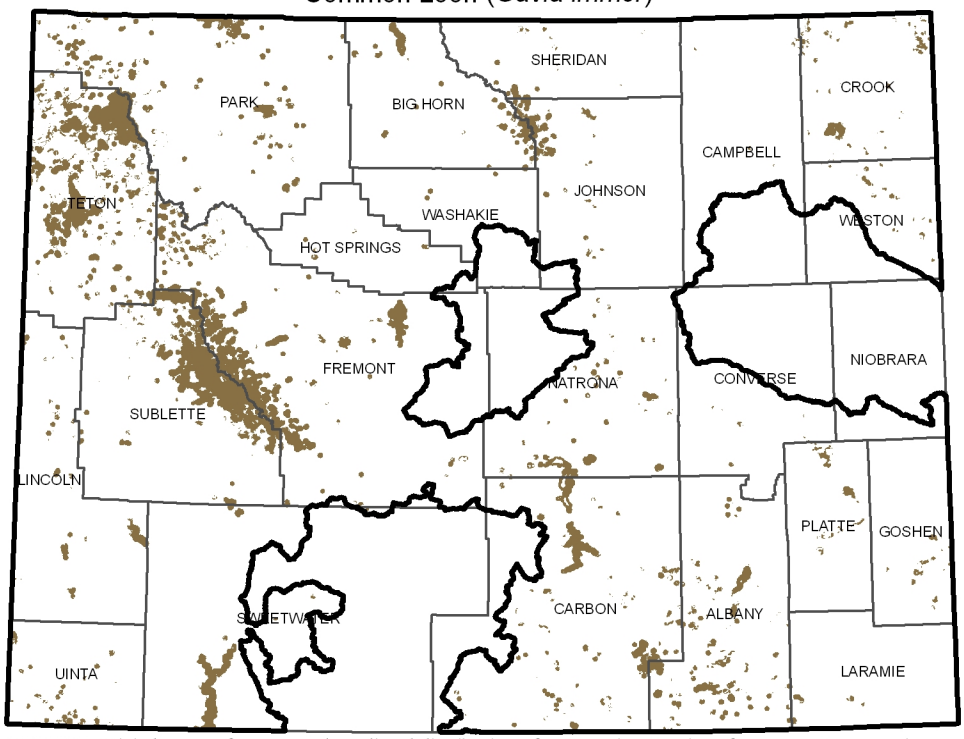
Common Loon (*Gavia immer*)



SOURCE: Digital maps of ranges and predicted distributions for Wyoming Species of Greatest Conservation Need: April 2010. Wyoming Natural Diversity Database. University of Wyoming, Laramie, Wyoming. Note that brown indicates the predicted distribution of the species; heavy black lines indicate outermost boundaries of possible occurrence.