



Lead Sinkers

A major danger to loons today is fishing tackle containing lead. Loons swallow lead sinkers when they pick-up gravel off the lake bottom—gravel helps the birds grind up fish bones in their crop. After the birds consume a sinker they often die within two weeks. Once the lead is ingested nothing can be done to help them.

Mercury

Loons eat crayfish and fish, which contain high levels of mercury. As the loons have no metabolic means for eliminating the toxin, it accumulates in their bodies affecting their nervous systems. This causes lethargy and behavioral abnormalities that make loons less successful at raising young.

Mercury falls from the atmosphere all the time. More falls when it rains and snows, but it also falls on a clear day. About 40% of the mercury gets into the atmosphere from mid-western power plants, 40% from New England power plants and incinerators, and 20% from global sources. Bacteria converts the elemental mercury into methylmercury which is then incorporated into living organisms. Each time one animal eats another animal the mercury becomes more concentrated. Consequently, if fish have high mercury levels then the loons that eat them can have even higher levels. Other fish eating birds like eagles, osprey, and kingfishers can also have high mercury levels.

There are many threats to loons. Some of the primary threats include lead sinkers, mercury and botulism contaminated fish, lake development, and oil spills.



X-ray of a deceased loon with a lead sinker in it's intestines.

What YOU can Do!

- Purchase lead-free fishing tackle
- Alert your friends about the dangers of lead tackle to loons.



What YOU can Do!

- Recycle old thermometers and batteries.
- Support legislation that reduces mercury pollution.

Botulism

Loons in Maine are not threatened by botulism, but thousands of migrating loons are dying in Lake Erie each year. Botulism is a naturally occurring bacteria that in high concentrations can kill birds. Current research suggests that the large numbers of introduced species, including zebra and quagga mussels and the goby fish, are concentrating bacteria and the loons are then eating the contaminated fish.

Lake Development

Loons need safe places to nest, usually on small fresh water islands and in marshy areas. They also need undisturbed coves to safely raise their chicks. When lakes have a lot of boat traffic and the islands and shore become developed, loons can have a difficult time nesting.



Oil Spills

Fresh water and marine oil spills are serious threats to breeding and wintering loons. Loons are long lived birds, up to 30 years, and don't produce many young. Consequently, the overall health of the Maine loon population is compromised even when only one successful breeding pair is killed by a freshwater oil spill. During the winter, oil spills can kill hundreds of loons because they gather in large groups. Completely oiled birds almost always die because loons do poorly in captivity. Even a small drop of oil can compromise the waterproofing of the loons feathers. Any sort of waterproofing loss can cause the birds to get hypothermia and die.

What YOU can Do!

- When boating, be conscientious that you do not introduce foreign plant and animal species.



What YOU can Do!

- Support sustainable development
- Be an advocate for protecting loon nesting habitat
- Support lake associations



What YOU can Do!

- Support legislators with strong environmental records.



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