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## Birds of the Great Plains: Family Gaviidae (Loons)

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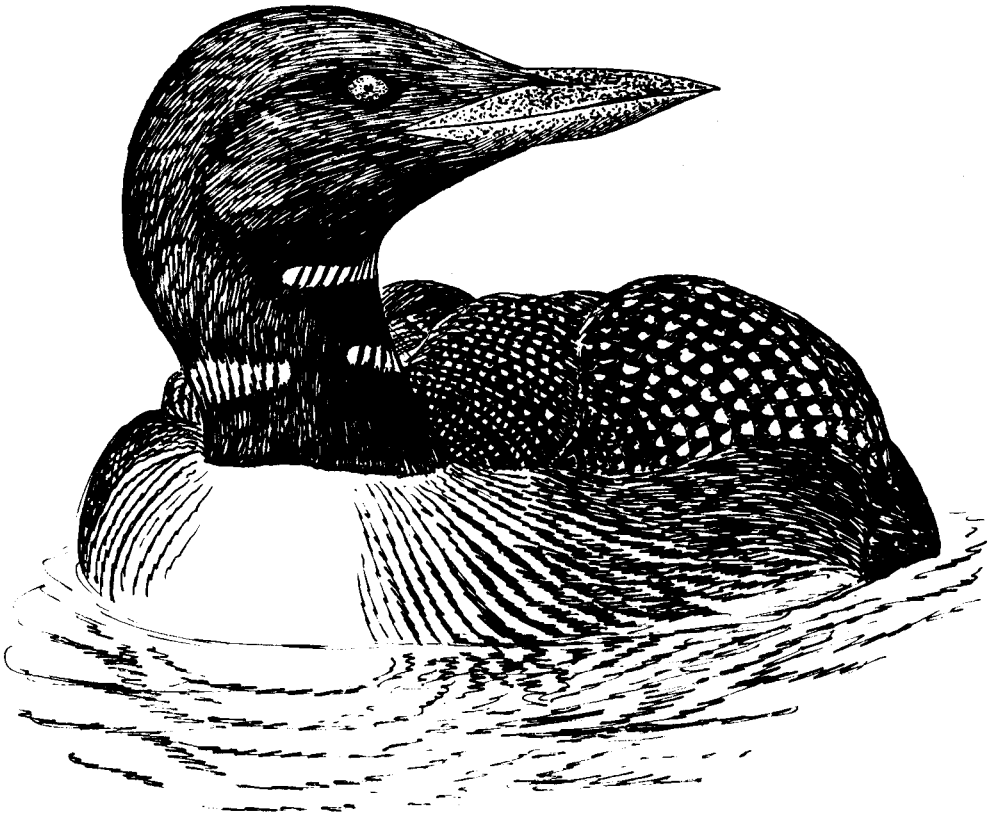
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# FAMILY GAVIIDAE (LOONS)



Common Loon

## Common Loon *Gavia immer*

**Breeding Status:** Restricted during the breeding season to north-western and west-central Minnesota, and the Turtle Mountains area of north-central North Dakota.

**Breeding Habitat:** Nesting is mostly limited to larger and deeper lakes having an abundant supply of fish. In Alberta, studies have shown that loons prefer to nest on lakes with many islands and with a minimum of human disturbance. Of a survey of nineteen lakes, the smallest that supported a pair of nesting loons was 916 acres in area, and a maximum of five pairs were found on a lake of 3,038 acres.

**Nest Location:** Studies in Minnesota and Alberta indicate that loons have a strong preference for nesting on islands, presumably as an antipredator adaptation, and for nesting in sheltered situations, probably to avoid waves. Virtually all nests are within 4 feet of the water, and most are directly on the water's edge. When loons nest in water, nests may be situated in emergent vegetation or, at times, on the side of a muskrat house. Most nests are situated so as to allow the adult an underwater escape, and when islands are used they are usually less than 2 acres in area.

**Clutch Size and Incubation Period:** Two eggs, olive brown marked with black. Incubation is by both sexes and lasts 29 days.

**Time of Breeding:** Minnesota egg dates range from May 8 to July 8. Unfledged young have been reported as late as November 3. North Dakota egg dates are all for mid-June, but young have been seen as early as June 9.

**Breeding Biology:** Loons are highly territorial, and shortly after arriving on their breeding grounds they establish a territory that may be up to 25 hectares (about 60 acres) in area, which they advertise by the familiar "yodeling" call. Most of the elaborate displays include bill-dipping, raising the head and breast, a "circle dance" between territorial opponents, "splash-diving," rearing upright in the water with folded or spread wings, and a low flying rush over the water. Copulation occurs on shore and is not marked by elaborate display behavior. Both parents care for the young, which often ride on their backs during their first few weeks of life. The fledging period is about 10-11 weeks.

**Suggested Reading:** Olson and Marshall 1952; Palmer 1962.

