An Evening with the Loons at White Lake State Park

By Amanda Chisholm, Interpretive Ranger with New Hampshire State Parks and Student Conservation Association

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Evening view of crescent moon over White Lake. Photo Credit: Amanda Chisholm

For those visiting and camping at White Lake State Park, loons may be common sights and sounds in the months of July and August. These curious birds may swim close to the beach during the early morning, on cooler afternoons, and right after light rain storms. Binoculars are a great tool to use to get a closer look at White Lake's resident loons and observe some of their unique behaviors. Another great way is to bring or rent a kayak or paddle board and get out on to the water. And that is exactly what I did! After weeks of spotting loons from the beach and hearing their iconic calls at night, I set out on my paddle board to spend an evening observing the common loons that call White Lake home.

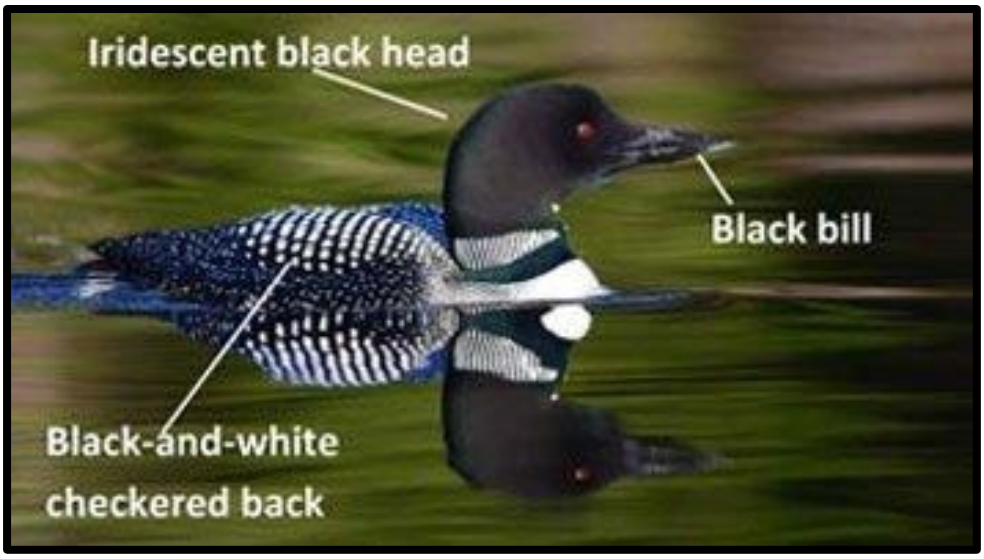
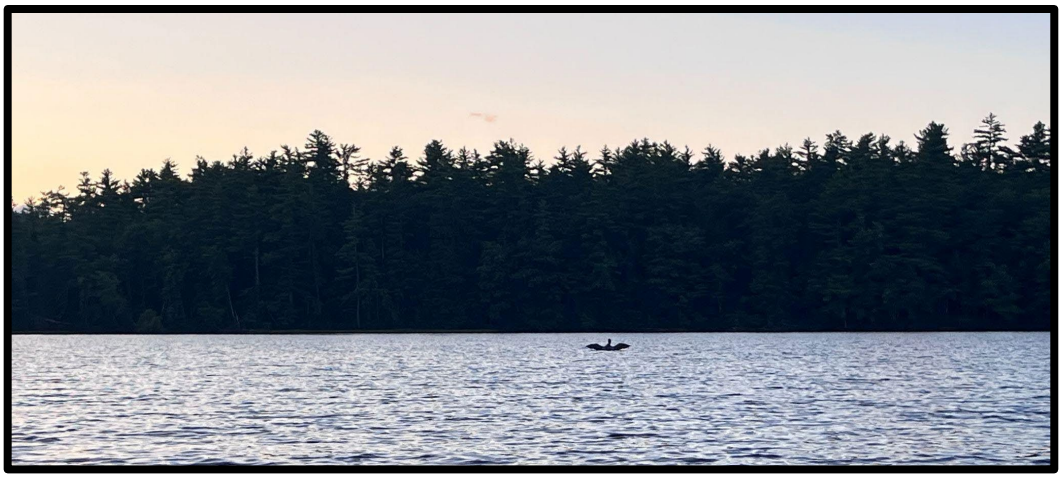


Diagram of identifying features of an adult common loon. Photo Credit: Loon Preservation Committee - “Loons and Other Waterbirds: How Do You Tell Them Apart?”

I spent a few minutes quietly paddling out into the open water before I saw any sign of the loons. As I approached the far end of the lake, I started to see two avian figures floating on the water, occasionally diving down under the dark surface. Looking closely, I was able to note their large size, black bill, and white ‘necklace,’ showing me that I found the loons! At this time, around 7:30 in the evening, the loons were on the hunt, diving down in search of fish to feed on. Unlike most other birds, loons are specifically adapted to diving for their food. Loons have powerful feet located far back on their body, and dense bones that allow them to dive over 200 feet under the water. A significant portion of the loon’s summer diet consists of yellow perch, pumpkinseed, and catfish, all fish that can be found in White Lake.

After observing the loons dive for a few minutes, I watched them take a leisurely swim from the northeast side to the southwest side of the lake. As they went about their swim, I noticed the loons moving their necks around, rubbing their heads along their backs, and rearing up to flap their wings. I was watching the loons preen themselves! Daily preening for loons is needed to keep them clean and to make their feathers waterproof. In the process of preening, loons spread a special oil secreted from a gland near their tail all over their feathers, creating a waterproof layer on their feathers that prevents the cold water from reaching their skin. According to the Loon Preservation Committee, a preening loon may:

- Roll onto its side or back and pull at its breast and belly feathers with its bill
- Stick one leg in the air and paddle in circles
- Rub its head against its back and shoulders to disperse oil
- Flap its wings hard and rise out of the water, appearing to be unable to take off
- Shake its wings, head, and tail



Preening common loon on White Lake. Photo Credit: Amanda Chisholm

After they were done preening, the loons continued to swim towards the southwest bank of the lake, where they rested in a patch of aquatic plants. One of the loons let out a short wail, a form of long-distance communication that is common to hear at night. I was also lucky to hear the loons hooting at each other, a short-distance communication usually used between loons in a family unit. The wail and the hoot are just two of four calls that loons make, with the tremolo and yodel being used in situations where a loon feels threatened or aggressive. If you are observing a loon and hear a tremolo or yodel, you may be too close!

As the sun began to set, the loons set off again towards the middle of the lake. I began to turn back and start my return paddle to the boat launch, when I saw the loons start swimming directly at each other. Once the loons got nearly beak-to-beak, they suddenly dove under the water, appearing a short while later a bit further off. Thanking them for the amazing behavior I was able to witness, I bid the loons goodnight and returned to dry land.



Pair of common loons on White Lake. Photo Credit: Amanda Chisholm

Loons are incredibly interesting birds, from their sharp beaks to their striking plumage to their unique behaviors. Being able to see loons from the beach at White Lake State Park is an absolute treat and is something that many beachgoers can do this summer. So next time you visit White Lake, keep your eye out for the loons. Whether you spot them with binoculars from the beach, get a closer peek from the hiking trail around the lake, or set off on the water on a kayak, paddle board, or canoe, I promise you, they are anything but common!



Adult common loon showing off its summer (breeding) plumage. Photo Credit: Kittie Wilson.

Interested in visiting White Lake State Park? Check out New Hampshire State Parks for information about day-use reservations and camping.

Want to know more about loons? Check out the Loon Preservation Committee for information about loon calls, appearance, behavior, diet, and so much more!

The Discover the Power of Parks Program is a collaboration between the New Hampshire Department of Natural and Cultural Resources – Division of Parks and Recreation, Student Conservation Association's New Hampshire Conservation Corps, AmeriCorps, and Volunteer NH.