



Nature Guides

Decoding Loon Language

Early May 2011

Featured species: Common Loon

Loons are the iconic bird of Canada – enshrined on our dollar coin and found across most of the country. They have been well-established around here for a while now, but migrants are still over flying us as they head further north. Whether you just have them for a short time in the spring and fall, or are blessed with them throughout the warmer weather as we are, their eerie voices remain a quintessential ‘call of the wild.’

Few waterfowl have as wide a range of vocalizations, each with its own meaning:

Call	Description	Meaning
Wail	Wolf-like howl; 2 seconds	Summons mate/offspring
Tremolo	Laugh-like; 1 second	Alarm; flight call
Yodel	Wail, plus yodel-like undulations; to 6 seconds	Territorial by male, spring dusk to dawn
Hoot	Short, soft ‘hoo’	Maintain contact in group

Common Loons will also use visual displays to communicate:

- Bill dipping, which may reduce aggression when two birds meet in group situations;
- males standing up and treading water, often with wings out and yodeling, is a classic territorial display; and
- males extending the head and neck low on the water (often yodeling) is also territorial.

Loons are divers more so even than flyers, having solid bones and feet placed far to the rear that help it dive to 80 m and stay under for almost a minute. Of course, those bones also contribute to the long, running takeoffs (up to several hundred metres on a calm day) required to get airborne. Once on the wing, however, they can reach speeds of 120 kph.

Beautiful on the water, they are ungainly on land, building minimal nests in protected spots (islands, half-submerged logs) right next to water. Currently, they are engaged in courtship and mating, but eggs will not be laid until early June.

Although Common Loons are protected by law, they are showing reduced breeding success and have abandoned some of their breeding range in more populated areas, likely due to shoreline development and nest disturbance. Low-lying, nests are particularly susceptible to boat wakes. Loons are also dying from high concentrations of mercury and lead in their tissues, the latter from ingestion of lead fishing sinkers. If you boat or fish, give nesting areas a wide berth, and consider using non-lead alternatives for sinkers and jigs.

A good introductory, 60-second video for kids can be found here (select *loons*).

Other happenings:

Top R4R Picks

Resources for extending the learning

Go Johnny Go

Elementary, Secondary

Canada's Forests – Vol. 3 All

Things Big and Small

Elementary, Middle

- Note: Almost too much is happening now to keep up with, much less write down here. I can only mention a few representative events and species. Keep your own eye out for happenings in your area, and let the rest of us know about them.
- [American Toads](#) complete the amphibian chorus, their long trills (embedded in previous link) coming from possibly any patch of standing water or backyard pond, day or night. Lasting up to 30 seconds, each competing male will [call](#) at a slightly different pitch. They will also try to mate with almost anything that moves, finally [clasping](#) the much larger female from the back. Mating can be easily observed soon after calling starts. Toad eggs are in [ribbons or strings](#), rather than the clumps that frogs produce.
- Those of you on the Precambrian Shield will soon be treated to the first hatch of [black flies](#), confirming that water quality is pretty much up to snuff. Limited to fast-running streams, black fly [production](#) can be over 30,000 individuals/metre²/ season. The first wave comes from [larvae](#) that have grown over the winter, while later hatches come from [larvae](#) that overwintered as eggs. If you look carefully, you can actually see adults pop out on the surface and buzz around a bit before flying off to a bit of vegetation to rest and harden. While most black fly species produce only one adult generation/year, females may produce eggs 2-3 times per season, and may emerge ready to lay eggs that don't require a blood meal. Unfortunately, though, most do, and while not all black flies [bite humans](#), enough do to make things miserable for a while. Both sexes also feed on nectar, and contribute to plant pollination (eat a blueberry, thank a black fly), as well as to meals for flying insects like damself- and dragonflies, bats and insect-eating birds.
- There is now a veritable avalanche of birds arriving from Central and South America, including a number of beautiful warblers that are mostly passing through: [Yellow, Palm, Nashville, Blackburnian, Cape May](#) and [Cerulean](#), among others. As in the fall, if you go out on calm nights you may be able to hear contact calls from the massive flocks heading north at this time.
- Other avian arrivals include: [Black Terns, Eastern Kingbirds, House Wrens, Ovenbirds, White-crowned Sparrows](#) and [Baltimore Orioles](#). Migrants respond to weather, pinned in place by north winds and advancing far on southerly ones. Rainy mornings are good times to check for migrants just hanging around, even in city backyards or schoolyards with a bit of shrubby edge habitat. Check also woodlots, hedgerows, roadsides and wetland margins.
- The hummers are definitely here! There have been a handful of [Ruby-throated](#) sightings in SW Ontario, and as far north as Wasaga Beach, Orillia and Bancroft, but none yet to our feeder in the Kawarthas. Keep your eyes peeled!
- Midland Painted Turtles will again be out [basking](#) on logs and rocks in your local wetlands, at times raising their body temperature 8-10 degrees above the surrounding air. This temperature is needed to hunt, digest and develop eggs.
- Spring butterflies may be out early this month, again dependent on temperatures. They need an extended period of warm weather to change into adults. Look for [Olympia Marble, Chryxus Arctic, Cabbage White](#) and [Hoary Elfin](#). Check those shrubby margins, fresh Sapsucker holes and especially lilac blossoms.
- The [Monarch migration](#) from Mexico has reached its most northern extent. Now we await the next generation. The good news is that Milkweed has grown quickly [compared to last year](#), so there should be lots of food for developing caterpillars.
- [White-tailed Deer](#) does are banishing their male offspring from the immediate area prior to giving birth, in order to minimize interbreeding. So watch the roads for [roaming deer](#).
- [Common Horsetails](#), small, primitive remnants of once-massive [Carboniferous forest](#) tree-like plants, can be found in damp areas along roadsides. Sometimes [spore cases](#) can be seen at the tips of the [jointed stems](#). Horsetails require water for sperm to be able to access eggs. Smaller stems will eventually 'leaf out' of the joints, producing a [brushy](#) appearance. Bits of silica sand reinforce the stems, and their granular texture reflects the name, '[scouring rush](#)'.
- Whites and yellows are the main colour themes for many early bloomers. Look out for Red and [White](#) Trilliums (very early this year), [Spring Beauty](#), [Yellow Trout Lily](#) and [Early Meadow Rue](#). Woodland herbs must pack a lot of growing into the short time before the canopy closes and light is reduced by up to 99%. Look for insects around these plants.
- Trees beginning to leaf out here include Pin and Choke Cherry, [Manitoba](#) and [Norway](#) Maple, Trembling Aspen, [Serviceberry](#) (flowers before [leaves](#)) and the willows. Leaf out can proceed very fast, so pay attention! Sketching leaves from one day to the next can show marked changes as they unfurl. Some leaves lie fully-formed within the buds and just have to be 'inflated'.
- May 5 is the mid-point of spring, and around here, the last frost generally occurs by mid-month or a bit later. It may be sooner or later where you are – [find out](#), and compare that to the actual last day of frost this year.



International Day for
Biological Diversity: May
22nd, 2011