

For Creative Minds

The For Creative Minds educational section may be photocopied or printed from our website by the owner of this book for educational, non-commercial uses. Cross-curricular teaching activities, interactive quizzes, and more are available online. Go to www.ArbordalePublishing.com and click on the book's cover to explore all the links.

Loon Fun Facts

A loon is a large water bird that looks something like a duck, but is not related to a duck at all. Loons belong to a family of ancient birds, at least 20 million years old. The best-known species is the common loon (*Gavia immer*). The common loon is the state bird of Minnesota.

Loons spend almost all of their lives on water, and come on land only to mate, build their nest, and to incubate their eggs.

Scientists think loons may live as long as 30 years. ***Who do you know who is about 30 years old? Does that seem old to you? Is that a long time for a bird?***



The common loon is famous for the black and white pattern of its summer feathers, and its many eerie, unmistakable calls.

Loons eat small fish, insects, snails, crayfish, frogs, and salamanders.



Underwater, loons almost always use their feet to move, not their wings. ***What parts of your body do you use to swim?***

Loons' webbed feet (adapted for swimming) are set so far back on their bodies that it is difficult for them to walk on land.

Loons are able to fly at speeds of 60 to 90 miles (96.5 to 145 km) per hour. ***Many cars on a highway drive about 60 miles (96.5 km) per hour. If a loon flies at 60 miles (96.5 km) per hour, how long does it take to fly five miles? What is five miles from your house or school? How long does it take you to drive those five miles? Walk? Ride a bike?***

While most birds have hollow, sponge-like bones, making their skeletons light, loons have solid bones. To lift their heavy bodies into the air, loons need a long runway, sometimes several hundred yards of water surface.

Loons have been known to dive to depths of more than 100 feet. They usually dive for about a minute at a time to hunt for food. How long can you hold your breath? How deep can you dive in a swimming pool?

Male and female adult loons look alike, though the male is often a little bigger.



Common loons weigh between 8 and 15 pounds (3.6 to 6.8 kg) and get larger in size as you go from west to east (Maine has larger loons compared to the west or Midwest.) ***Math activity: find something in the house or classroom that weighs 10 pounds or 5 kilograms (bags of flour, a few books).***

They are 28 to 35 inches (71 to 90 cm) long with a wingspan of an adult being up to 58 inches (147 cm) wide. ***Math activity: use a yard stick to see how long a loon is and how wide the wingspan is. Use chalk to draw how big a loon is on the driveway, a quiet street, sidewalk, or playground.***



Loon Life Cycle

Put the common loon life-cycle events in order to spell the scrambled word.

Loon pairs are territorial during the breeding season which means they defend an area around their nest and young, chasing other loons away if they come too close. Sometimes these chases lead to intense fights between the birds. Loons usually pair off with the same partner each year, but not always.

Common loons spend summers on lakes in the Northern United States and Canada. Loons migrate each season, flying back from their winter, ocean homes usually to the same lake.

They build their nests right at the shoreline because they need to slip on and off the nest without being seen by predators. Sometimes people will float an artificial nesting platform for a loon to nest on, which is especially useful on lakes where dams artificially raise or lower the water level each year.

Loon parents keep their chicks in a sheltered "nursery" area of the lake until they are three to four weeks old. Their feathers turn from downy brown to gray, and gradually the young loons swim in a larger part of the lake.

In winter, they live on the ocean along the Pacific coast, all the way to Mexico, and along the Atlantic coast, south to Florida and the Gulf of Mexico. Look at a map and identify where Loons spend the summer and winter. **Do they live in your area?**



Chicks spend their first couple of hours drying off in the nest and then leave it forever. They move to the lake to swim.

After the female lays one or two olive-colored eggs, the male and female share the job of sitting on them until they hatch after 27-28 days.

In the fall, the adult loons leave the lake to return to the ocean before the young loons do. The adults also lose their black and white summer feathers, which are replaced by gray, winter plumage. Young loons are ready to fly when they are 10 to 12 weeks old. When they reach the ocean, they stay there for several years before returning to the lakes to breed.

For the first two weeks, young chicks often ride on their parents' backs to rest and to be protected from eagles, large fish, and snapping turtles that may try to eat them.

Thanks to "Birds of North America Online" <http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna>, maintained by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, for the use of their loon map.