Minnesota Loon Restoration Project

Purpose

The Minnesota Loon Restoration Project objectives are to reduce mortality and increase the number of young loons produced in Minnesota. The primary emphasis of this project is to provide loon nesting habitat by protecting natural lakeshores through acquisition and/or easements. By providing permanent protection of targeted lakeshores, this facilitates direct protection of loons and ensures future availability of nesting habitat for Minnesota's state bird. This project focuses on 8 northern counties: Becker, Clearwater, Beltrami, Hubbard, Cass, Crow Wing, Itasca, and Aitkin. These counties have the potential to sustain quality loon habitat. Conservation efforts will help to ensure the future of loon nesting and rearing of young on lakes.

Status

Minnesota is home to about 12,000 adult loons; the highest in the lower 48 states. Although their numbers remain stable in Minnesota according to data collected by the MN Department of Natural Resources (MN DNR) Minnesota Loon Monitoring Program, loons are considered to be vulnerable to several prominent threats. Long-lived and high up on the food chain, loons are susceptible to the accumulation of environmental contaminants (e.g., lead-based fishing tackle). During migration to and from the Gulf of Mexico, loons may encounter natural disasters and disease such as botulism and E. coli infection. Loon habitat is threatened by fragmentation and human disturbance. In addition, climate change impacts water quantity and temperature, altering vegetation and fish forage for loons.

Background

On April 20th, 2010, the *Deepwater Horizon* drilling unit exploded, resulting in a massive release of oil from the BP Exploration and Production Inc. (BP) Macondo well, causing loss of life and extensive natural resource injuries from Texas to Florida. An assessment of injuries to the Gulf's natural resources and the services those resources provide was conducted. As part of a 2016 settlement, BP agreed to pay $8.1 billion in natural resource damages over a 15-year period, and up to an additional $700 million for adaptive management or to address injuries to natural resources that are presently unknown but may come to light in the future. The *Deepwater Horizon* Open Ocean Trustee Implementation Group (herein Open Ocean TIG) is responsible for restoring natural resources and their services within the area that was injured by the oil spill.

In 2019, the Open Ocean TIG's first restoration plan was finalized. As part of this restoration plan, the Restoration of Common Loons in Minnesota project was funded $7.52 million to reduce mortality and increase the number of young loons produced in Minnesota. The MN DNR MN DNR Nongame Wildlife Program was awarded $4.8 million for acquisition and/or easements of lakeshore loon nesting habitat, enhancing loon productivity by providing artificial nesting platforms on targeted lakes, and engaging MN lake associations in loon conservation activities. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency was awarded $1,270,600 towards reducing loon exposure to lead-based fishing tackle.

Goals and Objectives

Objective 1: Acquire loon habitat. This is the top priority of the project, as lakeshore habitat is a crucial part in the life cycle of loons. Permanently protecting natural lakeshores, thus, providing quality habitat is the best strategy for ensuring loons successfully breed, nest, forage, and rear young in Minnesota.

Objective 2: Augment natural nesting with artificial nesting platforms (ANPs) in targeted locations. In some situations, augmenting natural habitat is necessary for loon success. ANPs can increase loon productivity when 1) water levels fluctuate during nesting season, 2) significant and recurring predation is occurring, and 3) loons are present but protecting or enhancing natural nesting habitat is limited. The MN DNR can work with you to evaluate if an ANP is appropriate. For more ANP assistance, join the Loon-Friendly Lake Registry Program.

Objective 3: Promote stewardship of lakes with loons by engaging community members in the Loon-Friendly Lake Registry Program. This is a voluntary program that allows communities to make an individual lake Loon Friendly. Enrolling in the program includes working with the MN DNR for implementation. This includes documenting the history of loons on the lake, identifying changes to the lake in the previous 10 years, assessing nesting, rearing, and foraging opportunities for loons, evaluating barriers to loon success such as human disturbances or predation, connecting with the MPCA's Get The Lead Out! Program, and recommending voluntary actions to improve lake conditions.

Objective 4: Participate in joint monitoring of project implementation and outcomes. We monitor our efforts closely by working with federal partners (U.S. Geological Survey and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). You can help!

Ways to Get Involved

Volunteer LoonWatcher Survey - LoonWatcherSurvey.dnr@state.mn.us

Volunteers who either live on or regularly visit lakes with loons have the opportunity to record their own observations on loons throughout the summer and report their findings at the end of breeding season. Observations include: loon numbers, nesting success, activities, and any problems (i.e., predation or human disturbance).

MN Loon Monitoring Program – Link for More Information

This is a long-term study of the loon population in six distinct regions across the state. Volunteers visit their assigned lake one morning during a 10-day period in mid-summer and count the numbers of adult and juvenile loons. The MN DNR has over 20 years of data on more than 600 lakes! This program helps detect changes in the population and reproductive success of loons and enables us to anticipate any problems that could jeopardize the future of Common Loons in Minnesota.