## *Common loon*

Status

Federal status: G5 N4B N5N, Not listed
NH state status: S3, Threatened
ME state status: S4S5, Not listed

Common loons were historically widespread throughout Canada and the northern United States. Following severe population declines, they are now considered to be stable and/or increasing in the heart of their breeding range. Populations in New England are increasing, although they appear to be topping out and may eventually decline in both Vermont and New Hampshire, due to increased human development of lakeshore habitat.

The expert panel indicated that the current outcome for this species is D in the northern New England region. Historic population levels of this species were likely much higher than they are now, then they crashed to very low levels; populations are increasing now, but will never get back to historic levels due to loss of habitat. However, the panel believes the species is still viable in New England.

Distribution

Common loons breed in Alaska and northern Canada, east to Iceland, and south to central Massachusetts, Montana, and California. They winter on the Atlantic coast from Newfoundland to the Gulf of Mexico. In New England, the common loon breeds throughout Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire, in central Massachusetts, and perhaps in Connecticut. The New England region is import to the species as a whole; this population is disjunct from the core range of the species and may be genetically different.

In New Hampshire, a study showed that of the 767 Great Ponds (lakes and ponds greater than 10 acres), historically several hundred had a history of supporting loons, but in 1976 only 84 were reported as being used by loons. The number of nesting loon pairs in New Hampshire has risen from 86 in 1986 to 127 in 1993. The species is concentrated in the Lakes Region and North Country, with scattered breeding sites throughout the rest of the state. A small breeding population of common loons has been monitored on the WMNF from 1996 – 2002. Loons in Maine are distributed throughout the state but are concentrated in northern regions and nest only rarely along the coast. It is unknown if any nest on the WMNF in Maine.

Habitat

The preferred breeding habitat of common loons is large and small fish-bearing lakes with clear, warm, shallow water, and little or no human disturbance. Lakes should be at least ¼ mile long to allow for flight take-off. Loons nest in herbaceous vegetation on islands and lakeshores, and will use artificial nest pads where available. Loons will use man-made reservoirs, but the water fluctuations typical of these habitats can lead to nest destruction, predation, or abandonment.

Wintering habitat includes inland lakes and rivers, as well as coastal marine habitats such as bays, coves, channels and inlets. Loons will move offshore to waters as much as 100m deep and 100 km from shore if coastal waters are not clear enough.

Limiting Factors

The primary factor limiting the recovery of loon populations is human development of lakeshores. Development often results in the loss of nesting habitat, reduced water quality, and increased human presence. Other threats on breeding grounds include human disturbance, recreational use of lakes, and water fluctuations. It is uncertain whether acid precipitation is limiting habitat suitability or loon reproduction. On wintering habitats, oil spills and industrial pollutants are likely impacts. Common loons are susceptible to lead and mercury poisoning, epidemics of types C and E botulism, aspergillosis, internal parasites, and a host-specific black fly, and can drown due to entanglement in monofilament fishing line and gill nets.

Viability concern

Populations levels plummeted due to habitat development and disturbance. Species is recovering now, but can never reach past levels because some habitat is gone. Around the Forest, habitat may continue to be reduced by lakeshore development, making small Forest population increasingly important.

Management activities that might affect populations or viability

Recreational development on the shores of lakes and large ponds could eliminate suitable nesting habitat and increase human disturbance on suitable water bodies. Even if nesting habitat remains, human use of a lake can disrupt loon nesting, so management that would increase use of suitable lakes and ponds could reduce nesting success.

If loons are using impoundments, removal or alteration of the dam could eliminate suitable habitat.

References

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