White Lake Loon Survey and Wildlife Observations
June 27 to July 4th, 2020

Joyce Benham and Bob Carrière

Photo credit: Joyce Benham

Because of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, boat traffic was relatively light on White Lake. The weather was pleasant all week long and so we had ample time to complete our observations. This year, it was not only humans who were facing an existential threat. The loons on White Lake were on their own dealing with a very serious issue.

On our first outing on the lake, it quickly became evident that 2020 was a difficult year for loons. There were fewer adult looms to be seen and very few chicks.

An article appearing in the Ottawa Citizen reported that the issue which resulted in poor loon reproduction was an infestation of a species of black fly (Simulium annulus) which only attacks loons and not humans. In the article, Dr. Piper, a loon researcher from California said that these black flies are "active in May, when the adult fly needs a meal of blood in order to reproduce. And clouds of the tiny flies (smaller than the kind that go for humans) swarm around each loon, just as they are sitting on eggs. In years when fly numbers are low, the loons put up with it. But in years with many flies, loons can be driven off their nests and the eggs don't hatch. It has been a dreadful first round of nests for most breeding pairs". The article further states: "Typical pairs in the study area abandoned

their first nesting attempt in early May because of the clouds of flies that descended upon them and have only just begun to re-nest or think about doing so.

“Based on what we have seen, it appears that 70 to 80 per cent of all pairs could not stand to incubate the first clutch of eggs they laid in early to mid-May, making 2020 even slightly more devastating a black fly year than 2014, the previous worst year on record.

The only way to escape black flies is to dive and stay underwater. Loons can leave their eggs uncovered for a couple of hours, but if they completely abandon the nest, then the eggs are finished”.

We also observed that water clarity was high and that there were abundant green filamentous algae in many places as well as dense beds of aquatic plants throughout shallow areas of the lake.

The observation number is correlated to a numbered location on the map below. These sites are those which have in the past hosted loon nests or fishing locations of adult loons. Any site numbers omitted was because of inactivity.

Site specific observations:

I*n each of sites 12 and 19, there was one nesting pair of loons each with two chicks. Unfortunately, there are the only two sites on the lake which produced offspring. By early fall and before loons migrated, we observed that three of the four chicks had survived. It is well known that less that 50% of chicks survive their first year.*

Site 1:	Single adult loon.
Site 4:	Two adult loons.
Site 5:	On southeast point of Hardwood I., active osprey nest with two chicks. Two adult loons were observed along with an empty nest.
Site 7:	Single adult loon.
Site 8:	Six adult loons.
Site 9:	1 adult loon.
Site 12:	Two adult loons plus two chicks.
Site 13:	Three adult loons.
Site 16:	One adult loon.
Site 17:	Three adult loons in the immediate area.
Site 18:	Two blue herons.
Site 19:	Two adult loons plus two chicks.
Site 20:	Several blue herons.
Site 28:	Two adult loons.

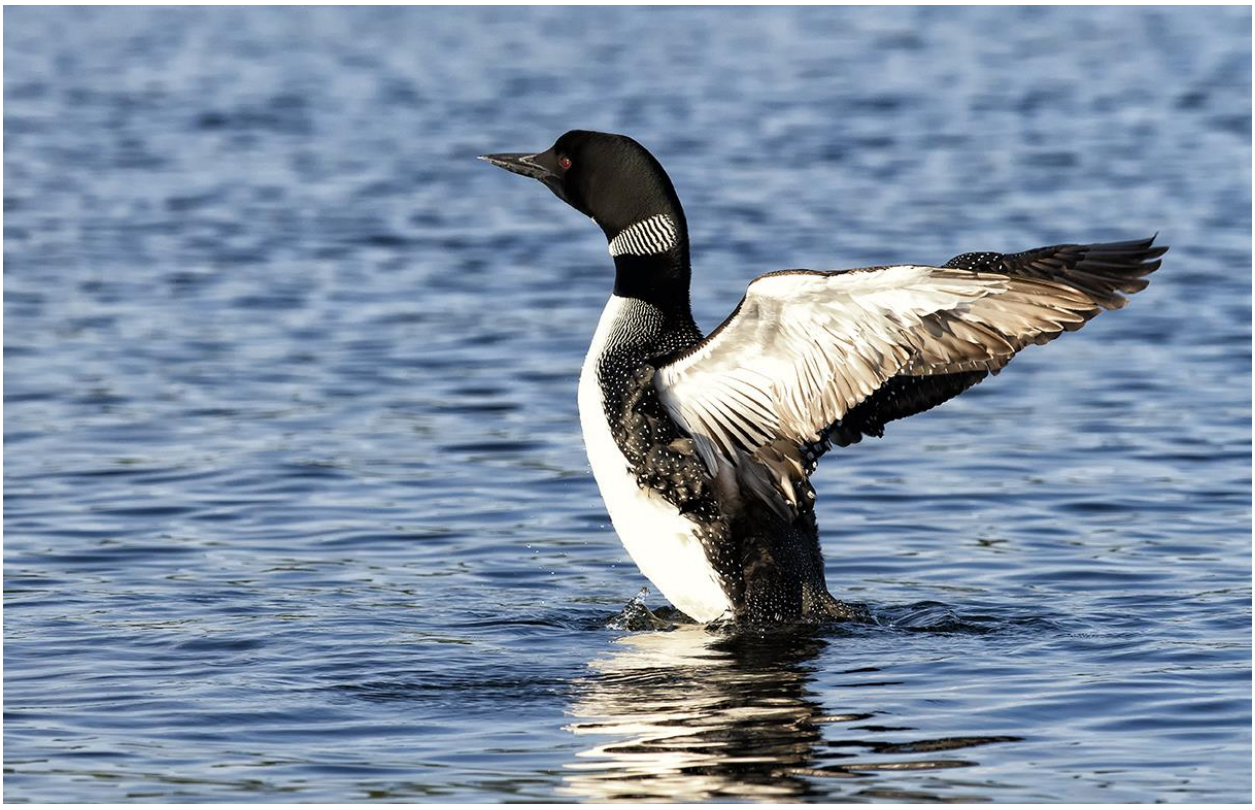
For more information on loons and their struggle with black flies, please click here.

Summary of Loon observations for 2020:

Total number of adult loons: 25
Number of nesting pairs: 2
Total number of chicks: 4

The table below summarized the results of loon surveys for seven years starting in 2013. It is clear that 2020 was a difficult year for loons. When compared to 2019, the total adult loon population has declined by 34% and the number of chicks produced by 83%.

OBSERVATION	2013	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of Adults	23	40	32	45	44	38	25
Number of Nesting Pairs	7	10	11	19	10	12	2
Number of Chicks	16	17	16	21	18	23	4



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Loon Observation Sites

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