

## **AN APPARENT PREFLEDGED COMMON LOON CHICK FOUND AT MONTEZUMA NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE**

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Unusual occurrences of birds outside their normal range are important to the ornithologist, if only to retrospectively trace range expansions, shifts in habitat use, or changes in patterns of migration or movements. The importance of documenting such occurrences cannot be understated since even firmly-based observations by competent observers quickly enter the realm of the anecdotal as important details and dates are forgotten.

A survey recently completed by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) suggests that New York's Common Loon population may be increasing in numbers (Parker *et al.* 1986). This, combined with increased popular interest in loons, may foster reports of loons breeding outside what heretofore has been regarded as their traditional range. Details of the following incident are presented both to document its occurrence and also to provide increased awareness of Common Loon biology.

On Monday, 14 July 1986, the Nongame Unit of the DEC received a report via Ron Dodson of the National Audubon Society's New York Regional Office that a Common Loon chick had been found on Route 89 in Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge (MNWR), Seneca County. He provided the name of Mark Nicholas, a volunteer at the refuge, who had further information.

I contacted Nicholas and Anne Marocchini, an assistant refuge manager, on Monday afternoon and learned that the bird had been found the previous day, Sunday, 13 July, on Route 89 near North Spring Pool. It was identified as a Common Loon by a number of refuge staff. Color photos of this bird were examined by Nongame Unit staff and are on file at the Nongame Unit. I have pieced together the following description of the bird. It was 2/3 adult size, with poorly feathered wings. Its primaries were still in their shafts. Its plumage was likened to "typical winter plumage" and it still had brown down present on its back. This description, combined with an assumed nest initiation date of 1 May (early for loons, Bull 1974), would put the bird at a maximum of 6 weeks of age, more than a month short of fledging (McIntyre 1975). The bird appeared healthy and in good condition but was perhaps a bit emaciated, particularly around the sternum. It was banded, fed, and held overnight by Barbara Olds, a Canandaigua wildlife rehabilitator, and subsequently released in the Main Pool of MNWR on

Monday morning, 14 July. Upon release the bird commenced preening and did several short dives.

The Main Pool at MNWR previously has been used by adult loons as a resting place during migration. The last time that adults were observed at MNWR previous to this incident was in late April, when a single bird was sighted. The refuge staff conducts periodic bird surveys and, had the refuge been host to a breeding pair of loons, it certainly would have been noted.

A visit to MNWR on Tuesday, 15 July, confirmed my recollection that North Spring Pool is full of standing dead timber and could not possibly have been used as a nesting site by loons. I was unable to locate the chick although I spent more than an hour inspecting the Main Pool from the dike with a spotting scope and about 1-1/2 hours canoeing around its perimeter. The pool offers thousands of hiding places so it is probable that the bird was still there.

In light of my visit and conversations with various people, there is no evidence of loons having bred at MNWR and the shallow, turbid water there makes this extremely poor loon habitat.

The origin of the bird is unknown. The discovery of the bird on the road is highly suggestive of either an accidental grounding or an intentional release by someone unfamiliar with loon biology. The former can be ruled out since the bird apparently was flightless. The date suggests that someone may have captured the chick elsewhere over the July 4th weekend, tried to keep it as a pet, and then released it.

The possibility of local origin, either at MNWR or in nearby canals or Finger Lakes, is rejected for a number of reasons. The habitat limitations of the refuge have already been described. In spite of the recent Breeding Bird Atlas project, there has been no recent documented loon breeding outside the general Adirondack/St. Lawrence region. Bull (1974) describes several extralimital breeding records and there is always the possibility that another may occur. However, descriptions I have received of "loons" with broods of 4 to 5 chicks on Cayuga Lake and other nearby waters add little current support to this possibility.

The ultimate fate of the chick is not known, as it was not observed subsequent to its release. However, even under the best of conditions, young loons are inefficient predators (Barr 1973) and continue to receive supplemental food from their parents until at least 7-8 weeks of age and sometimes beyond (Parker 1985). The highly eutrophic and turbid waters of the Main Pool would make foraging even more difficult for this visually-oriented predator. Since the loon was flightless, it would have been unable to move from the Main Pool to other waters more favorable for feeding.

Only 20 Common Loons, a species of "Special Concern" in New York, have been banded in the state since 1957 (Parker *et al.* 1986). There is a great need to capitalize on incidental captures of this species in New York in order to obtain data on its longevity, causes of mortality, and movements. Thanks to the persons involved, this bird was banded and color photographs were taken prior to its release. Though the fault on no one, the Nongame Unit, which would have been very interested in examining this bird and in providing information concerning release sites to optimize its chances of survival, did not learn of the incident until after the loon's release.

Persons concerned about increasing our scientific knowledge of this interesting bird can immediately advise the Nongame Unit of any future recoveries of dead or living loons, as well as provide details of unusual observations.

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