Our Loons and Eagles

"Empty Nesters"

If you are trying to procreate this year, I hope you have better results than our loons and eagles. For several consecutive years, we have enjoyed witnessing their young ones go from needy chicks to independent adolescents in a single summer. But not this year.

Our eaglets typically hatch in April. What happened? The word on the lake was that the late April storms wrought havoc with the nest. The chick(s) either did not hatch or did not survive the onslaught. But what do we know? I called the New Hampshire Audubon Society to see what they thought of our hypothesis. I spoke with volunteer Kim Doolan, who put me in contact with their senior raptor biologist Dr. Chris Martin. Much to my surprise, Dr. Martin said we were right! The April storms caused many New Hampshire eagle eggs to succumb and eagle parents to abandon their nests.

Our two nesting pairs of loons fared no better than the eagles. Their struggles were easier to document as they happen within feet of the lake shore rather than high in a pine tree. The “east end” nesting pair failed to build a nest and on June 13, the female laid her egg in the sand about eight inches from the waterline. It makes you wonder about their instincts, parenting skills and I.Qs., but we'll come back to this issue.

The egg was gone the next day – could have been a predator, but no evidence was found of shell fragments. Predators don't take eggs "to go", so shell bits are usually found at the scene. According to the Loon Preservation Committee (LPC), the egg likely rolled into the lake, but regardless, an egg laid on the open sand that close to the water had no chance of survival.

There remains a sliver of hope for our “east end” couple. If loons’ first egg(s) fail, they do have a chance at a second brood, but they have to get busy right away. The chicks need time to fledge and migrate to the Atlantic before the lake freezes; and flying takes a lot of strength for the bird with the lowest wing area to weight ratio in the world. The good news is that witnesses spotted

the pair "getting busy" repeatedly on the shore of the Lewis property and who can blame them. The view of the lake at sunset from their house is very romantic.

The “west end” loons appeared to be model parents. They had a secluded nest protected by bushes and placed high enough above the lake surface to weather a storm or a boat’s wake. What’s more, this site proved successful in the past.

One of the loons was always on the nest or close by while the other took a break. When one loon replaced another on the nest, they gave each other a little smooch.

On the 4th of July, neighbor Eric Von Der Linden posted the hatching of the chick on the Lovell Lake Community Facebook page and Jeff LeGrow photographed its launch into the world. What a wonderful birthday. But the joy was short-lived. The next morning Eric reported that the chick had vanished. He wrote: “Both parents left the area after looking for the chick all morning.” What a shame; the parents worked so hard. The LPC reports that it could be natural causes or predation. No trace of the little guy and we'll never know.

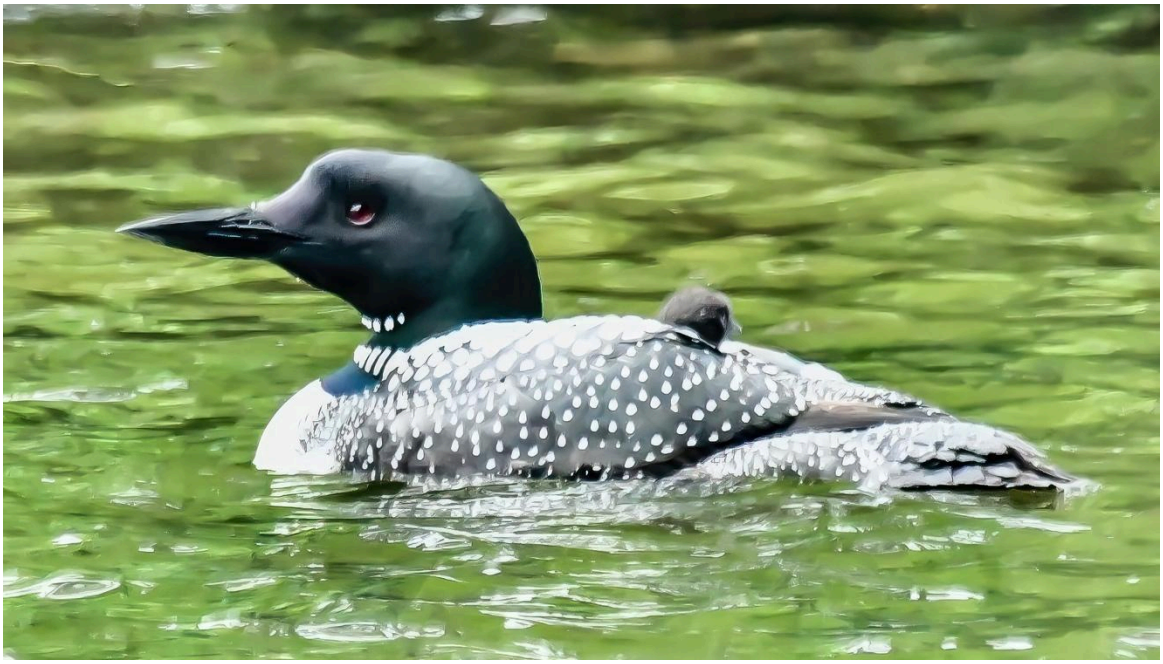


Photo courtesy of Jeff LeGrow

Now, there's lots more to this story, but I have come to the end of my 500-word eNewsletter limit and if you care to read more, click here and you will be directed to the LLA Website. If you are done with me, thanks for your attention. Jillian, how do you want to handle this? Post a link? If the entire article is to be posted on the website, then the above paragraph won't make sense on the website.

Move to website...

Humans are about to enter our saga and bring clarity. In late June, we got a call from Loon Preservation Committee volunteer Dusty Perin who asked if we would take LPC's summer intern for a cruise around the lake to count the loons. Dusty introduced us to Michael Crimby, a very intelligent, personable, and dedicated biologist who just graduated from U. Maine. His mother wants him to go to grad school. He's not so sure. Anyway, we take Michael around, count the loons and wish him the best. We thought that the next time we would hear from Michael would be after he won a Nobel Prize.

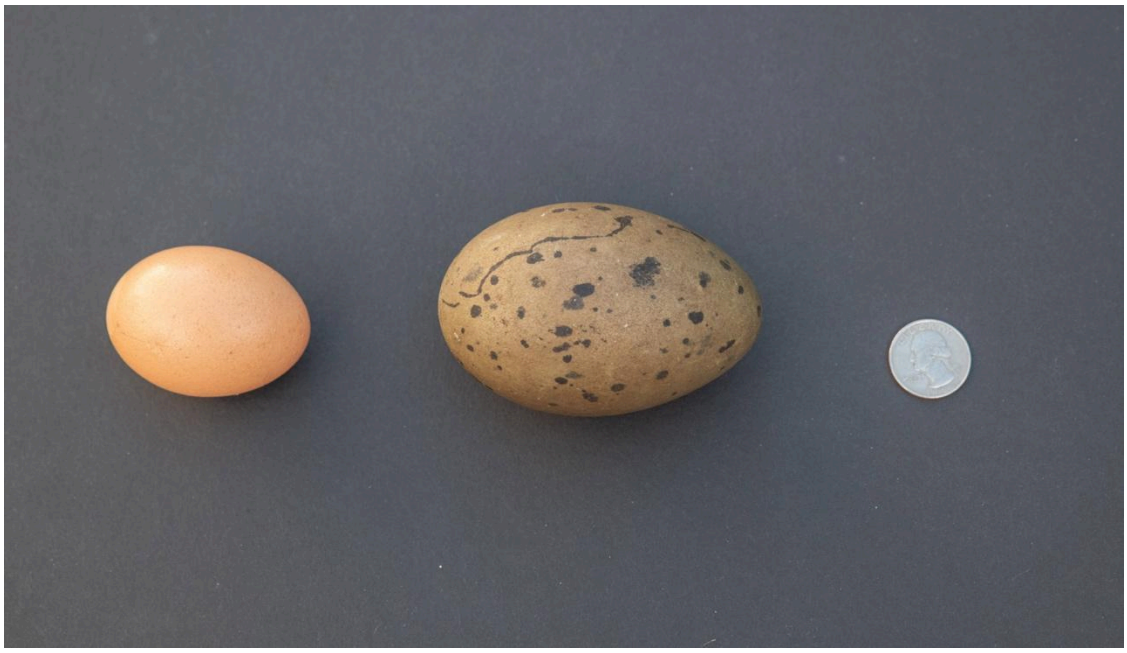
However, we would see a lot more of Michael in the next few of days. On July 5th, when we heard about the demise of the “west end” chick, we called Michael to share the news. He came to the lake that day to collect eggshell fragments so the biologists at the LPC could study them for any clues regarding the cause of death. As you can see, just a few pieces were found.

But, big news, during his forensics, Michael discovered that there was a second egg intact in the nest, but no adults nearby. Was searching for their lost chick more important than the second chick? Had the parents permanently abandoned the second egg or would they return? As with the “east end” loons, you wonder about their parenting skills, but we'll come back to this in a couple of paragraphs.

To determine whether the parents had abandoned the nest, Michael followed LPC protocol: He took a marker and made a small X on the shell of the intact egg. Michael would return to check the nest the following day. If the loons returned, they would rotate the egg and the X would not be visible. If the X was visible, it would be proof that the parents gave up.

Michael returned the next day. He found the egg whole, but the X was staring up at him. The parents had abandoned the nest. There would be no second chick. Now, the “west end” loons, just like the “east end” loons still have a chance, but a slim one.

When Michael put his gloved hand on the abandoned egg and it felt cold, a sign that the chick inside was lifeless. No hope of incubation. He collected the egg for study, but first brought it by our house. For those of you who have never seen a complete loon egg before, here it is along side a chicken egg and a quarter. The loon egg is about four inches long and two inches wide.



This ends my chronicle of the ill-fated reproduction efforts of our favorite birds. But before closing, I want to revisit the matter of what appears to us to be bad parenting – no nest, laying the egg in the sand, abandoning the second egg. But what do we know?

We share the planet with 7.7 million other species of animals who know things that we don't, do things that we can't and can sense things beyond our comprehension. Many sense the coming of earthquakes and hurricanes. Some dogs can tell when their owner is about to have a seizure. Snakes use infrared radiation to catch dinner in the dark. Bats and cetaceans use radar to locate prey. The list of such wonders is endless. At the end of their first summer our juvenile loons fly to the Atlantic with no adult supervision. Our fledgling osprey fly to Brazil and Venezuela with no experience and no maps. How do you suppose they learned a second language so quickly?

Six years ago, I got a call from the Sherrill family reporting that a big baby bird (about 6-8 inches tall) had fallen from its nest. The baby was a raptor – a Merlin, small falcon. Check out the feet in the photo. The chick was alive and active and screaming its head off. The parents were flying around screaming their heads off. Juliann Sherrill wanted the baby saved. Matt Sherrill wanted the screaming to stop. Jane Kelly, a raptor rescue specialist, collected the baby and took

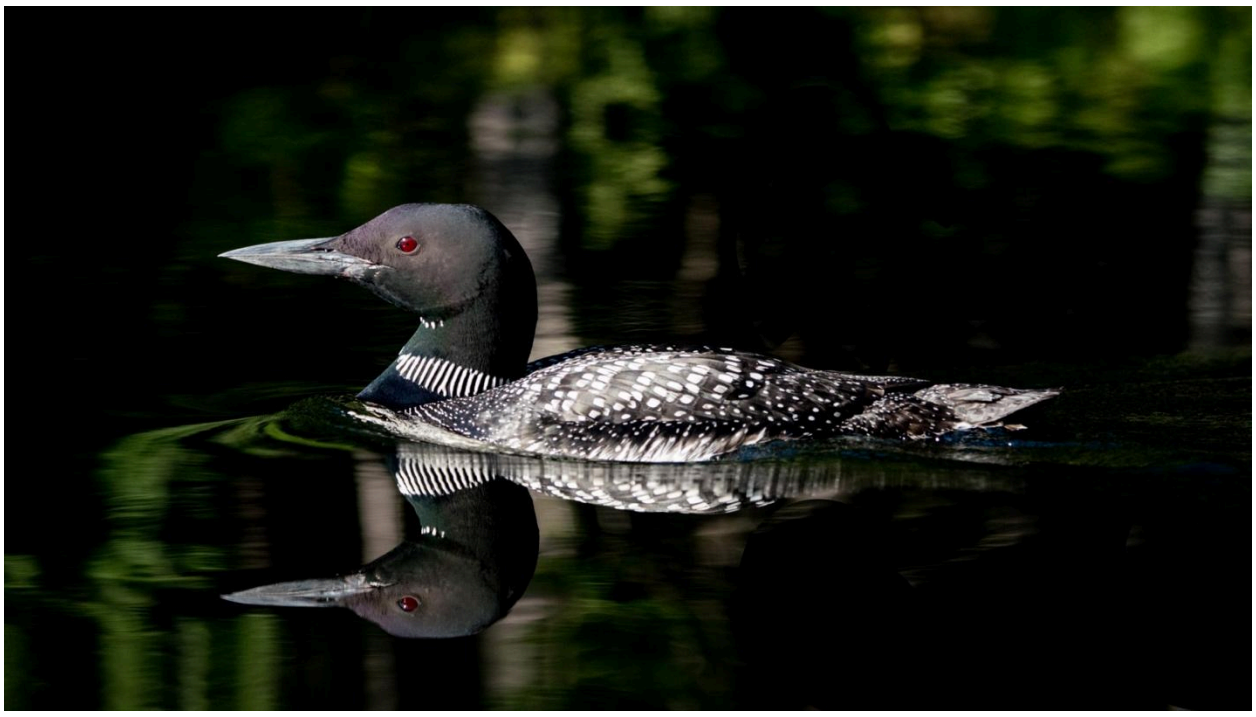
it to her rehab facility. While feeding the chick, she noticed something was wrong. Jane called the vet, who determined that the young male Merlin had cataracts – a death sentence for raptors. The bird would never be able to feed itself and could not survive in the wild. Jane kept the chick named him “Lovell” and took him around to schools to show the kids. To this day he is still employed.

Here come some uncomfortable questions: Did Lovell fall from the nest or was he kicked out? Did Lovell’s parents know that he would never be able to survive on his own? Did they instinctively understand that it was less suffering for Lovell and better for the universe if they stopped feeding their chick? Plenty of evidence exists suggesting that defective chicks (and mammals) are abandoned or worse by their parents. Is that what happened?

My grandfather had an adage (and it turns out the Bible, John 6, has it too) that says: “God hates waste; waste engenders scarcity.” Maybe animals are all economists in the purest sense of the term – most efficient use of available resources. Could it be that what we think of as this human concept of economics is hard-wired into animals? Feeding little Lovell was a waste of resources - time and food – and the parents knew it.

Now, let's get back to our "east end" loons. Remember, they built no nest and laid the egg in the sand – no chance of survival. Was this a paucity of parental instincts? Were they lazy? Were they just plain stupid? Or, is it possible that they sensed that the egg was not viable and knew that building a nest and sitting on the egg for weeks was a waste of time and effort? Now, how about our "west end" loons abandoning the second egg? Our friend Michael suspected the egg was lost when he touched it. Did our industrious nest-building loons just give up? Did they know that one egg was viable but not the other? Is that why they built the nest and incubated the first egg and abandoned the second egg? Is it possible loons know more about being a loon than we do?

This is a good place to end this metaphysical journey, but I can't help myself. I was listening to a lecture on the loon population growth. The human effort expended to sustain growth was justified with the words: "… because, after all, everyone wants more loons." Certainly, everyone I talk to wants the loon population to continue to increase. But are at least two ways to look at every issue? Is there a benefit in asking: "How many loons do the loons want?"



Now, I'm done.