



## Common Loon – *Gavia immer*

**Protection status:** *Washington State endangered species listing*

Within Washington State common loons nest on lakes and reservoirs in the [Okanogan](#), [North Cascades](#), [East Cascades](#) and [Puget Trough](#) ecoregions. Non-nesting birds are found throughout the state during summer months. During the winter they are found in coastal and inland marine waters in the [Northwest Coast](#) and Puget Trough ecoregions, with a few birds found on interior reservoirs, rivers and lakes.



Photo: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

### Physical description

Common loons are large swimming birds that grow up to 90 cm (3 feet) long and weigh up to 8 kg (almost 18 pounds), that sit low in the water. They have straight ‘dagger-like’ bills that are black during the mating season and grey throughout the rest of the year. During the mating season they have a black head with a white and barred necklace, and a checkered pattern on their back. Throughout the winter they are evenly grey on the head and back, with a white neck and underside. Males and females look alike; however the male is generally larger. Young common loons look similar to winter adult but have more white on their head and back.

### Life history

Common loons breed once a year in the summer beginning at age 2 or 3, and are thought to be monogamous, remaining with the same partner for life. A pair establishes a breeding territory in the early spring, typically between 60- to- 200 acres in size, which they patrol regularly. Nests are built on islands or peninsulas projecting into the water, and when completed tend to a clutch of 1- to- 3 (usually 2) brown eggs, one or two days apart. The male and female take turns caring for the eggs and protecting the nest from predators. Usually the chicks hatch within 29 days, and are then transferred to the parents backs for an additional three weeks. The fledgling phase lasts between two and three months, during which time they follow their parents around the established territory. Once they are able to fly, the juvenile loons become independent of their parents.

### Habitat use

Common loons generally nest on clear lakes that have complex rocky shorelines, numerous bays and islands, and deep inlets; and that have low algal content. However, they also will use floating bogs if fish are present. Weather restricts their habitat selection as they cannot nest on areas with frozen water. They prefer to nest at locations that are on an island or shoreline edge that are sheltered from winds and within 5 feet (1.5 m) of water; positioned within the vegetation to allow for a clear view of their territory. During the winter months they stay mainly in nearshore coastal waters, over shoals and in sheltered bays, inlets and channels as well as in some freshwater lakes, reservoirs and low gradient river valleys. Their

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distribution is variable, mainly dependent on the abundance and stability of food, protection from storms, and water clarity. Common loons eat fish and other aquatic animals, including crayfish, shrimp, leeches, and some aquatic vegetation. Since they are visual predators—meaning that they locate fish by site, and dive deep to catch them—water clarity is critical.

### **Why are common loons included in the Aquatic Lands HCP?**

The *Aquatic Lands Habitat Conservation Plan* addresses 29 animal species that depend on submerged or intertidal lands for either all or a significant portion of their life history. Specific threats that warrant protection of common loons include:

- Changes in habitat structure
- Increase in predation
- Decline in water and sediment quality
- Physical harm or harassment from activities that are covered in DNR’s Aquatic Lands HCP

### **The Aquatic Lands Habitat Conservation Plan**

The Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) is the steward of more than 2.6 million acres of state-owned aquatic lands beneath Washington’s navigational lakes, rivers, marine waters, and estuaries—and many tideland beaches. DNR sustainably manages these aquatic lands on behalf of the people of the state—to protect fish and wildlife and to provide opportunities for commerce, navigation, and public access.

The increased demand for the use of aquatic lands can be harmful to aquatic habitats and species. To encourage a balanced approach to managing and protecting these lands, DNR is developing its *Aquatic Lands Habitat Conservation Plan*. The HCP will provide a framework for managing the aquatic lands under DNR’s stewardship, to ensure the continued health of our state’s marine and fresh waters and the species that inhabit them.

### **Learn more**

For more information about DNR’s Aquatic Lands HCP and the other species that are covered in the plan, visit: [www.dnr.wa.gov/aquaticHCP](http://www.dnr.wa.gov/aquaticHCP)

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